

# Safety First

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among children and young adults in this country, and statistics show that about one in three Americans will be injured or killed in a motor vehicle crash.

One in three.

Whether or not you are driving, chances are that sometime during your life you will be involved in a motor vehicle crash. It does not matter how skillful you are or how much driving experience you have. You can never predict when and where a crash might occur.

This chapter explains the laws that address motor vehicle safety and suggests a few good practices to help you avoid serious trouble.



## Passenger Vehicle Safety

Passenger vehicles, including vans and pickup trucks, must have a number of safety equipment items in good working order. Each passenger vehicle must have safety belts for all occupants, a mirror, a horn, a lock for the engine's ignition, windshield wipers, an exhaust muffler, and two braking systems: a foot brake and a parking brake.

Each passenger vehicle also must have certain lights for driving in darkness or poor visibility. The vehicle must have two approved, correctly aimed white headlights in the front; two approved red lights in the back; and directional signals. In addition, the vehicle must have three red stop lights (brake lights) in the rear and a small white light to illuminate the rear license plate.

The CaresVan program, which is operated by the MassHighway Department and sponsored by Commerce Insurance Company, promotes highway safety and provides assistance to stranded motorists. For more information, visit [www.commerceinsurance.com/documents/CaresVan.pdf](http://www.commerceinsurance.com/documents/CaresVan.pdf)

**If the directional signals or brake lights on your vehicle stop working properly, you must have them repaired immediately. In the meantime, you must use the appropriate hand signals when turning or slowing (see Chapter Four for hand-signal diagrams).**

Every vehicle must pass an annual safety and emissions inspection. For details, see Chapter Six.

A passenger vehicle may be equipped with a spot light, but the spot light may be used only to read signs or to serve as an emergency light when the vehicle's headlights are not working. At a distance of 30 feet from your vehicle, a spot light may not shine more than two feet above the roadway.

Certain equipment and vehicle modifications are illegal. For more information, see Chapter Six.

After-market glass tinting is allowed on passenger vehicles, but with restrictions. Side and rear windows may be darkened up to 35 percent. Unless the RMV issues you a special medical waiver, tinting the windshield is a traffic offense that carries a fine and a possible license suspension.

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## Safety Belt Law

**Massachusetts law requires every occupant of a private passenger (Class D) motor vehicle—including vans and small trucks (under 18,000 lbs.)—to wear a properly fastened and adjusted safety belt when traveling on any roadway.** This applies to drivers and passengers, adults, and children aged 12 and over.

- Any driver who operates a motor vehicle without wearing a safety belt or any passenger 16 years old or older who is not wearing a safety belt is subject to a \$25 fine.
- For each occupant aged 12, 13, 14, or 15 who is *not* wearing a safety belt, the driver can be fined an additional \$25 per person.

This law will be enforced if you are stopped by a police officer for a possible traffic violation. Certain people are exempt from this law:

- Drivers and passengers of vehicles manufactured before July 1966
- Operators of taxis, liveries, tractors, buses, and trucks with gross weights of 18,000 pounds or more (However, under federal law, operators of certain commercial motor vehicles are required to wear safety belts.)
- Passengers of authorized emergency vehicles and operators of police and fire vehicles
- Any rural carrier of the U.S. Postal Service who is operating a motor vehicle on duty
- Anyone who is physically unable to use a safety belt. In this case, the person's disability must be certified by a physician



**An air bag is more effective and safer if you are wearing your safety belt.**

Because a crash can happen at any time, the best way to protect yourself while riding in a motor vehicle is to wear your safety belt at all times. For drivers and passengers alike, the simple fact is that *safety belts save lives*.

### **Child Passenger Restraint Law**

The Child Passenger Restraint Law was recently amended. Beginning July 11, 2008, the amended law now requires infants and small children to ride in federally approved child passenger restraints until they...

1. Are at least eight years old; and
2. Measure at least fifty-seven inches in height.

Children who are at least eight years old and who measure at least fifty-seven inches in height must use safety belts that are properly adjusted and fastened in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions. Violating this law carries a \$25 fine.

Any child restraint you use must have a sticker that says the restraint meets the U.S. Department of Transportation's (US DOT's) Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard No. 213 or that it meets the standards as established in 49 C.F.R. 571.213. The child passenger restraint must either be permanently affixed to a motor vehicle or affixed to the vehicle by a safety belt or a universal attachment system.

If your vehicle has a front-seat passenger-side air bag, never place a rear-facing child safety seat in the front passenger seat.

**A child's height and weight, not the child's age, determines which child safety seat is right for the child. Each seat is different; check manufacturer's instructions for exact height and weight limits.**



<b>Guide to Child Safety Seats</b>	
<b>Infant seat</b>	up to 20 pounds
<b>Toddler convertible seat</b>	20-40 pounds
<b>Booster seat</b>	40-80 pounds

The safest places for children to ride are in the back seat and, whenever possible, in the middle. Infant seats must face the rear of the vehicle.

To locate a certified Child Passenger Safety Technician to assist you to properly install a child safety seat, please call 1-877-392-5956 or go to [www.mass.gov/highwaysafety](http://www.mass.gov/highwaysafety).

## How Safety Belts Work

Safety belts, especially a combination of lap and shoulder belts, keep your body from being tossed around inside your vehicle or from being thrown out of the vehicle when a collision occurs. When used correctly, lap and shoulder belts reduce the risk of death and serious injury in a crash by about 50 percent.

In a crash, a properly fastened safety belt can help in many ways:

- **Protect you from violently hitting the windshield, dashboard, steering wheel, or other hard surfaces inside the vehicle.**

If you are traveling in your vehicle without wearing a safety belt and your vehicle collides with something head on, your vehicle will stop moving, but your unrestrained body will continue traveling at the vehicle's impact speed until it hits something hard, like the windshield. In addition to keeping you from hitting something hard, a safety belt will keep you from colliding with other occupants of the vehicle.

- **Keep you from being thrown out of the vehicle.** With lap and shoulder belts, your chances of surviving a crash are five times better, because you stay inside the protection of your vehicle.
- **Help the driver stay seated and maintain control of the vehicle to avoid a more serious crash.** The driver who wears a safety belt stays behind the wheel no matter what happens. If the vehicle were hit from the side, the safety belt would keep the driver from being pushed across the seat.

Hitting the windshield at 30 mph is like falling from the third story of a building and hitting the pavement.

A lap belt should be fastened low, snug, and flat over the hips, not twisted. A shoulder belt should be worn across the shoulder and chest. A shoulder strap should *never* be worn under the arm or across the face or neck.

## Myths About Safety Belts

The truth is safety belts save lives and reduce the risk of injury in a crash. Stories about the "dangers" or "hassles" of safety belts are simply unfounded.



The *right* way to wear a safety belt.



The *wrong* way to wear a safety belt.

***“I’ll be trapped inside the car if I’m wearing a safety belt in a crash.”***

You may have heard stories of cars catching fire or sinking in water. These types of crashes rarely happen, but if you were involved in one, wearing a safety belt would increase your chances of *not* hitting your head and losing consciousness. If you remain conscious during and after such a crash, you’ll at least be able to unbuckle your safety belt and get out. You can be trapped in your vehicle whether you’re wearing a safety belt or not. The fact is, even if you’re upside down, it takes less than a second to unfasten your belt.

***“My car has air bags, so I don’t need to wear a safety belt.”***

An air-bag system is a *supplemental* safety device and is designed to work *with* safety belts, not instead of them. You still need to wear a safety belt whenever you drive. Furthermore, unless your vehicle is equipped with side airbags, front air bags are designed for front-on collisions *only* and do not offer protection in collisions from the side or rear.

***“I’m only driving a short distance. I don’t need to wear my safety belt.”***

Most motor vehicle crashes happen within 25 miles of home. In fact, eight out of every ten accidents occur when drivers are going 40 mph or less. Don’t take chances. Wear your safety belts whenever you drive.

***“I’m only running to the store. It’s too much trouble to put the kids in child safety seats.”***

Motor vehicle crashes are the most preventable cause of death in children. Most kids killed in car crashes would have survived had they been fastened properly into child safety seats. Take the extra minute to buckle your children into their seats before you set off on any drive.

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## **Air-Bag Safety**

*When combined with lap and shoulder safety belts, air bags are very effective in saving adult lives in motor vehicle crashes. To maximize air bag effectiveness and safety, however, you should follow certain procedures.*

- *Children in back.* Infants in rear-facing child safety seats should *never* ride in the front seat of a vehicle with a passenger-side air bag. With or without air bags, all children are safest when riding, properly restrained, in the back seat.
- *Child safety seats.* Infants and young children should always ride in age- and size-appropriate child safety seats. For more information, see the *Child Passenger Restraint Law* section previously in this chapter.
- *Air bags do not eliminate the need for safety belts.* To ensure the safe and effective operation of air bags, you should always wear both lap and shoulder belts. For more information, see the *Safety Belt Law* and *How Safety Belts Work* sections of this chapter.
- *Move the front seat back.* To allow for proper operation of your vehicle, you should position the front seat as far back from the dashboard as is practical. Also, if your front passenger seat operates independently, you should move it as far back as possible.

**A common cause of death and injury to children is being crushed by unbelted adults during a crash.**

Following these simple tips will improve your chances—*and those of your children*—of surviving and avoiding serious injury in a crash.

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## Inside the Vehicle

When driving, you must make sure that nothing interferes with your ability to see the road, react to situations, or operate your motor vehicle properly.

### ***Distracting Objects***

You must have no objects inside your vehicle that might interfere with your ability to drive safely. Nothing should block your view of the road, either ahead of you or through your mirrors. Be careful that nothing near your feet can roll and get in the way of your pedal controls (the accelerator, clutch, and brake).

### ***Cellular Phones and CB Radios***

You are allowed to use a cellular (mobile) telephone while driving as long as you keep one hand on the steering wheel at all times and can operate your motor vehicle safely.

**As this manual went to print, the Massachusetts Legislature was deliberating a bill that could change the cell phone law. Please check the RMV's website, [www.mass.gov/rmv](http://www.mass.gov/rmv), for the most updated information.**

### ***Headphones***

It is illegal to wear a radio headset or other types of headphones while driving. One earplug for use with a cell phone is acceptable.

### ***Televisions***

The law requires that any television installed in a private passenger vehicle must be located *behind* the front seat and not be visible to the driver. This ensures that a driver cannot be distracted by a television screen, even when looking sideways out of the vehicle.

### ***Truck Beds***

With very limited exceptions, and never at speeds greater than five mph, children under 12 years old are not allowed to ride in the beds of pickup trucks.

## Driving Defensively

Even the most experienced drivers make mistakes. Regardless of how many years you've been driving, at some point you will have to face equipment failures, bad weather conditions, unskilled drivers on the road, unpredictable pedestrians, and drivers who ignore traffic regulations.

The best way to prepare yourself for unpredictable events is to **drive defensively**.

- Always maintain good vision ahead and around your vehicle.
- Stay alert and be prepared to react to the unexpected.
- Maintain a safe distance around your vehicle.
- Drive at the right speed and know when to slow down and stop.

- Always wear your safety belt.
- Do not drive if you have been drinking, are on medication, or are very tired.
- Keep your vehicle in good working order.
- Obey the rules of the road and give the right-of-way when appropriate.

As a defensive driver, you should constantly look ahead of and around you, and frequently check your mirrors. Be aware of the road conditions or possible hazards that lie in front, to the sides and behind you.

- Take in the whole scene in front of you. Scan the roadside for vehicles stopping ahead and watch for individuals entering or exiting parked vehicles. Pay close attention to pedestrians or cyclists who may be sharing the road with you.
- Anticipate mistakes or unsafe maneuvers from other drivers.
- Watch for back-up lights of any vehicle ahead of you.
- Pay close attention to crosswalks. Don't rely on traffic signals alone to alert you to your driving environment. Motorists and pedestrians may ignore traffic signals.
- Always pay close attention when driving in the vicinity of playgrounds, schoolyards, and shopping centers, as children and pedestrians may be hidden from sight.
- Remember that the right-of-way is something you give. A big part of driving defensively is giving the right-of-way to prevent unsafe traffic situations.

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## Your Health and Physical Condition

Have your eyesight checked every year or two, and correct any vision problems immediately. As you age, you may find the clarity of your vision decreasing, or you may find it more difficult to see at night.

Because you must be in control of your vehicle at all times, it is important that you remain alert and responsive. You not only need good vision; you need good hearing as well.

There are certain situations in which you should never drive:

- When you have been drinking alcohol
- When you have taken any prescription drug or over-the-counter medication that can cause drowsiness
- If you are under the influence of any drug
- When you are very tired
- When you are emotionally upset. Emotional states like anger and depression can cause you to drive carelessly

On bright, sunny days, you should always wear sunglasses.

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## Checking Your Vehicle's Condition

The law requires you to have your passenger vehicle or motorcycle inspected for safety and/or emissions every year (see Chapter Six). However, you should always follow the

routine maintenance procedures recommended by your vehicle manufacturer. Each time before you enter your vehicle or mount your motorcycle, make a quick visual check for low tire pressure or any damage you may not have noticed before.

### **Brakes and Tires**

Pay close attention to changes in how your vehicle responds when braking. If you think you have a problem, have your brakes inspected immediately. If you feel the vehicle pull to one side when you brake, your brakes may need adjustment or repair.

Check your tires for proper inflation and wear. Rotate your tires as often as is recommended by the vehicle or tire manufacturer. It is dangerous and illegal to drive a vehicle with extremely worn or damaged tires. Tires must have at least 2/32 inches of tread depth in the proper grooves and no fabric breaks or exposed cords.

**The distance between the edge of a penny and the top of Lincoln's head is about 2/32 of an inch. A quick way to check your tire tread is to slide a penny into a tread groove. If you can see Lincoln's head, your tires are worn out.**

### **Steering**

Your steering wheel should not feel so loose that you notice a delay between when you turn the wheel and when your tires respond. With power steering, you should check the fluid level regularly. If your vehicle makes a high-pitched noise when you turn, you should have your power steering inspected.

### **Lights and Glass**

Make sure to check your headlights, brake lights, and turn signals periodically. Keep your lights clear of dirt, snow, and ice. Keep your windows and mirrors clean. Change your windshield wipers if they streak or fail to clear your windshield properly.

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## **Safe Distances Around Your Car**

Always keep enough space between your vehicle and others. Keep a cushion of space on all sides to give yourself room to stop safely or avoid hazards.

- When driving behind another vehicle, use the "two-second" rule for keeping a safe distance. On the road ahead, pick a fixed object, like a sign post or a tree. When the vehicle in front of you reaches that object, count out "one one-thousand, two one-thousand.....". If you reach the object before you count two, you are following too closely. Slow down until you've put enough distance between you and the other vehicle.

**The two-second rule is a minimum safe distance when road conditions are clear and dry and traffic is moderate but moving. Count three or four seconds for added safety, and allow more distance when traffic allows.**

- If following a motorcycle, allow even more distance than you would for another vehicle.
- Allow extra space between your vehicle and heavy equipment (for example, dump trucks, tractors).
- Never cut in front of heavy equipment or tractor-trailers. These vehicles carry more weight and need much more space to stop safely.

- Never tailgate a vehicle ahead of you. Tailgating is illegal and the main cause of rear-end crashes.
- If a tailgater is following you, move to another lane if possible or pull to the side of the road to let the tailgater pass.

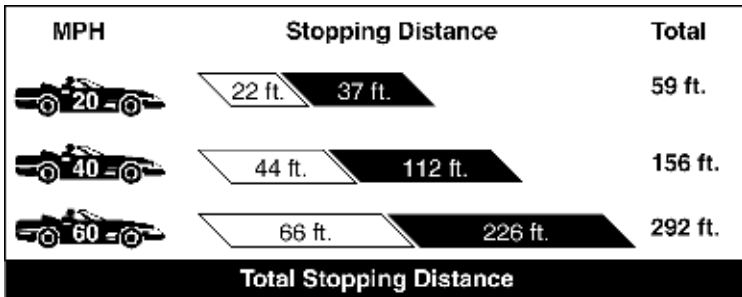
Allow yourself an extra cushion for problem drivers and problem situations:

- Blind driveways or obstructed-view driveways or roads
- Drivers backing out of parking spaces or driveways
- Children playing in nearby yards or near the roadside

## Braking and Stopping

Look well ahead of your vehicle so you have enough time to brake and stop safely if something gets in your path. The time it takes you to react, think, and apply the brakes is called reaction time.

On average, it takes about three-quarters of a second for you to react to a situation and step on the brake pedal. This time can also be measured in feet traveled, or reaction distance.



Sample stopping distance statistics from *How to Drive, A Text for Beginning Drivers* by the American Automobile Association (Ninth Ed.)

For example, at 50 mph, your vehicle would travel another 55 feet along the pavement in the three-quarters of a second it would take you to react. Once you apply the brakes, it may take you another 160 feet or more to come to a complete stop.

This would be your average braking distance on dry, level, unobstructed pavement.

Your total stopping distance would be about 215 feet (55 feet + 160 feet). If roadway conditions were anything other than clear and dry, your stopping distance would be greater.

Assuming your brakes and tires are functioning properly and the roadway is dry and level, remember these facts:

- If you are traveling at 60 mph it takes an average of 292 feet (almost a whole football field) to react to a hazard, step on the brake, and come safely to a stop.
- At just 30 mph, your total stopping distance might be 104 feet.

These figures are presented for educational purposes only, to illustrate that motor vehicles have a great deal of momentum when in motion and require much more distance to stop safely than you imagine. Your actual stopping distances will vary widely with road, weather, and vehicle conditions.

Follow some useful braking tips:

- Warn pedestrians, cyclists, or other drivers of possible trouble. Brake early and gently when preparing to stop or turn.
- Do not let your foot rest slightly on the brake pedal while driving. (This is called riding your brakes.)
- If your vehicle has antilock brakes, never pump the brakes.
- Always slow down when approaching a curve or an area of road where you cannot see clearly ahead.

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## Using Your Horn, Headlights, and Emergency Signals

It is important to know how to operate your vehicle's safety equipment properly.

**Use your horn to:**

- Warn pedestrians or other drivers of possible trouble
- Avoid accidents

**Do not use your horn to:**

- Express anger or complain about other drivers' mistakes
- Try to get a slower driver to move faster
- Try to get other vehicles moving in a traffic jam

**Use your headlights:**

- Use your headlights from one-half hour after sunset until one-half hour before sunrise
- In rain, snow, fog, or other inclement weather that makes it hard to see
- Anytime you have trouble seeing other vehicles
- To flash another vehicle to alert the driver to turn on his/her headlights

Use your emergency lights and signals when your vehicle breaks down, so that other drivers can see it. Make sure you get your vehicle as far to the side of the road as you can. For your own safety, stay off the road. Never take chances changing a flat tire in a traffic lane. Wait for help to arrive.

You can also use your emergency lights to warn drivers behind you that a traffic accident or major hazard lies ahead. Give other drivers as much warning as possible.

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## Night Driving

Nighttime driving is more dangerous than daytime driving because you cannot see as well. The law requires you to use your headlights from one-half hour after sunset to one-half hour

before sunrise. Always use extra care when driving at night, as vehicles, pedestrians, or road obstacles may not be readily visible. It is recommended that drivers do the following:

- Do not drive when you are tired or drowsy.
- Drive more slowly at night than you would in daylight, particularly when you are unfamiliar with the area. Drive at a speed that allows you to react and stop safely within the distance you can see ahead.
- Keep more space between your vehicle and other vehicles than you would normally.
- Switch your interior rearview mirror to the "night" position. This will cut down on the glare from headlights behind you. Keep interior dome lights off.
- To reduce the effects of glare from oncoming headlights, do not stare directly at the headlights. Instead, look to the lower right side of your traffic lane.
- Make sure your windows and headlights are clean.
- If another driver flashes headlights at you, your headlights may not be on when they should be, or you may not have lowered your high beams.

### ***High Beam Headlights***

In normal conditions, high beam headlights allow you to see about 350 feet ahead. Low beam headlights allow you to see about 100 feet ahead.

- Only use high beams in dark or remote areas where you cannot see the road surface ahead.
- If you are driving with your high-beam headlights, you must lower your headlights to low beam when you are within 500 feet of an oncoming vehicle or within 200 feet of a vehicle traveling ahead of you.
- If an approaching driver is using high beams, you may flick your headlights to remind the driver to dim his or hers. If the oncoming driver does not switch to low beams, stay to the right and avoid the temptation to turn on your high beams.

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## **Driving in Rain or Fog**

Rain and wet roads make it harder to start, stop, and turn. Hard rain, fog, and mist can also reduce your visibility dramatically. You are advised to use your headlights whenever you are using your windshield wipers.

Slow down at the first sign of rain. Many roads are most slippery when rain first mixes with road dirt and oil, forming a greasy film on the road's surface. If a road is slippery, your tires can lose traction and, in a heavy rain, your car can hydroplane.

Hydroplaning, which results from a combination of road conditions, water, and speed, means your tires are riding on a layer of water and have lost all contact with the road. If you feel your vehicle start to hydroplane, you're driving too fast for conditions. Slowly ease up on the gas pedal. Never hit the brakes or turn suddenly. You may lose control and go into a skid.

Following are some useful driving tips for driving in rain or fog:

- Increase the space between your vehicle and other vehicles. You need more distance to stop your vehicle. Be prepared to stop quickly, and keep within the limits of what you can see ahead.
- Be careful of wet leaves on the road. They can be as slippery as ice.
- Make sure your windshield wipers and window defoggers are in good condition.
- In fog, use your low beam headlights to reduce glare.
- Always use your directional signals.
- If it is hard to see the pavement or sign posts, slow down and look for road edge markings to guide you.
- Avoid driving through puddles. Wet brakes do not work properly. If you drive through a large puddle, apply your brakes lightly as soon as you can to dry them until you feel them working normally again.

To get accurate, up-to-date information about traffic and weather conditions, construction projects, and MBTA service, or to report problems on the road, the Highway Department has a new 511 phone service that replaces the former SmarTraveler service. To access this service, dial 511 from your cell phone or 617-374-1234 from a land line. It is available Monday through Friday from 5:30am – 9:00pm and weekends and holidays from 10:00am – 7:00pm.

## Winter Driving

Driving in winter is probably the most difficult and hazardous situation for both new and experienced drivers. You should practice driving in winter conditions, because motor vehicles handle much differently on ice and snow than they do on warm, dry pavement.

- Reduce your speed according to road conditions. Drive cautiously and accelerate gently.
- Never lock your brakes on icy roads. You will lose steering control. If you do skid, remember to **turn into the direction of the skid** (see Driving Emergencies in Chapter Five).
- Increase the space between your vehicle and others. You need more distance to stop safely on slippery surfaces.
- Because the earth does not insulate them, bridges and highway overpasses tend to freeze before the rest of the road and can be very slippery.
- If it is snowing, start slowly. Test your brakes by tapping them gently to see how much traction your tires have.
- Make sure your windshield wipers and defroster are in good condition.
- Before driving, remove ice and snow from your vehicle. Clear all windows, windshield wipers, headlights, and brake lights. Clear ice and snow from your vehicle's roof so they do not blow off while you're driving and create hazards for drivers behind you.
- Keep your fuel tank at least half full to prevent the fuel line from freezing.
- Make sure you fill your windshield washer reservoir with a cleaning solution that won't freeze.
- Keep a blanket, flashlight, and small shovel in your trunk.

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## Pedestrians

At least one in five motor vehicle deaths involve a pedestrian. Take extra care to look for pedestrians when you drive. Pay close attention in congested areas where pedestrians are greater in number. Be especially careful of...

- **Children** – Children are often the most unpredictable and hardest to see. Be cautious when driving near school zones, parks, bus stops and playgrounds.
- **Joggers and Skaters** – The popularity of jogging and in-line skating has created more pedestrian hazards. Joggers and skaters do not always obey traffic signal and cross-walk rules.
- **Pedestrians, when you're backing up** – Use caution when backing in reverse. Do not rely solely on vehicle mirrors or sensors, as blind spots may obstruct your vision and hide obstacles that lie behind the vehicle. It is recommended that you turn your head and look out the window before beginning to back up. If children are nearby when backing out of a driveway, get out of your vehicle and check behind it.
- **Visually impaired individuals** – White canes with red tips and guide dogs should be associated with visually impaired individuals. Drivers should use increased caution when driving near a potentially visually impaired individual. If the individual is trying to cross the street, you must stop until the person has crossed safely to the other side.

Remember, the law says that you must slow down and stop if necessary if a person is walking in the street you are traveling on. Always look ahead for places where pedestrians may be in the road but not visible, such as around a curve, at the top of a hill, or between parked cars.

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## Bicycles and Mopeds

Except on limited-access or express state highways where prohibited by posted signs, bicyclists and moped riders have the same rights to use the public roadways as any other drivers. They must obey the same traffic control and right-of way laws. But, like pedestrians, these riders are often difficult to see in traffic and are poorly protected against being hit by motor vehicles.



Be safe, when passing a bicycle or moped:

- Reduce your speed. The wind turbulence or air pressure change caused by your passing vehicle can throw a rider off balance.
- Leave plenty of room between your vehicle and riders.
- If you have too little room in your lane to pass safely, you must wait for oncoming traffic to pass or for the lane to widen.

At night, you should dim your headlights if you meet an approaching bicyclist. Be aware that a bicyclist or moped rider might react to a road hazard and swerve suddenly, just like any other driver. Remember, you should respect the rights of a bicyclist to use the roadway, as you would respect the rights of another driver.

When parked on the side of a roadway, remember to check carefully for approaching bicycles or mopeds before opening your vehicle door.

## Motorcycles

### *Check Twice, Save A Life • Motorcycles Are Everywhere*

Motorcycles are motor vehicles, just like cars and trucks. In recent years the number of motorcycles registered in the Commonwealth has grown steadily. Although the typical riding season lasts from March through October, some motorcyclists ride throughout the year. By being aware of their presence and operating characteristics, you can share the road safely and courteously.

Although motorcycles travel as fast as cars and trucks, riders are exposed to additional dangers on the road, including weather and changing road conditions. Because motorcycles lack the safety features of an automobile, the risk of injury to a motorcyclist involved in a crash is much greater.

- **Changing lanes** – While driving on the highway, pay particular attention during lane changes and merges. Motorcyclists are often hidden in blind spots due to their size. Always check your mirrors and blind spots for motorcycles. Signal early, and check twice before changing lanes.
- **Following Behind** – Leave plenty of space between your vehicle and a motorcyclist in front of you. Use a four-second following distance (compared to a two-second for other motor vehicles).
- **Sharing lanes** – Motorcycles have the same right as other vehicles to use the full lane width. Although a motorcycle may physically use a smaller portion of the road, never share a lane of travel. Motorcyclists often move within a lane to prepare for an anticipated traffic maneuver or to avoid road debris, potholes or surface oil. **Never move into the same lane space as a motorcycle, even if the lane is wide and the cyclist is riding to one side.** Crowding into a lane with a motorcycle is illegal and extremely dangerous.
- **Turning at Intersections** – Cars or trucks turning left in front of an oncoming motorcycle cause a high number of crashes. While turning at intersections, pay particular attention to motorcycles in the area. Because motorcycles are smaller and often obscured by other traffic, it is sometimes difficult to accurately judge their speed and position. Although you may have enough time to turn, an approaching motorcyclist may not have time to safely adjust speed. Allowing the motorcycle to clear the intersection first will allow both you and the rider to move safely.
- **Road and Weather Conditions** – Conditions that are minor problems for cars and trucks are often major hazards for motorcycles. Gravel, potholes and slippery surfaces can force a motorcyclist to change speed and direction suddenly. Inclement weather



**It is illegal for a motorcycle operator to weave between lanes at any time.**

requires increased stopping distance for motorcycles. Please allow sufficient room both in front of and behind a motorcycle in case sudden stopping is required.

By following these few simple tips, you can share the road safely with motorcycles and other motor vehicles, making the Commonwealth safer for all.

The RMV now has a **Motorcycle Manual**. This manual focuses exclusively on motorcycles and is available in all RMV branches and online at [www.mass.gov/rmv](http://www.mass.gov/rmv).

Check it out for important information you need to get a motorcycle license and to be a safer rider.

## Motorcycle Safety

The law requires any motorcycle to have a number of safety equipment items in good working order. These items include a horn, rearview mirror, fenders, a muffler, and brakes. One left mirror is required by law, but two are recommended. Use the mirrors constantly to check traffic to the rear, especially before stopping.

The front of your motorcycle must be fitted with a white, properly aimed headlight. When it is attached to a motorcycle, a sidecar must have a white, forward-facing light. The law also requires your motorcycle to have a rear, red tail light, a stop light, and a white light to illuminate the license plate. You should make sure that both brake controls light up the stop (brake) light.

Your motorcycle seat or saddle must be secured properly, and handlebars must not be above your shoulders when you are seated properly.

Every motorcycle must pass an annual safety inspection. For details, see *Chapter Six*.

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## Riding Gear

As a motorcyclist, you should dress for comfort and protection. Riding gear provides protection from the elements and can reduce your chances of serious injury in a crash.

**State law requires motorcyclists and their passengers to wear helmets that meet the current US DOT's Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard No. 218.** Labels indicating that a helmet meets this standard must be placed both inside and outside the helmet. US DOT standard helmets can prevent or reduce head injury in case of a crash.

**Eyeglasses, goggles, or a protective face shield *must* be worn, unless the motorcycle has a windshield or a screen.** Ideally, you and your passengers should always wear eye protection.

You should wear long sleeves and full trousers to help maintain body heat and moisture, protect against sunburn, and reduce skin abrasion in case of a crash. Heavy clothing provides more protection if it fits properly. Leather and modern abrasion-resistant synthetic materials provide the best protection. To make yourself more visible to drivers, use retroreflective tape to brighten darkly colored riding gear. In addition, you should wear full-fingered

leather gloves to protect your hands and better grip the motorcycle's hand controls.

To ensure good footing and protection against hot metal or moving parts, you should wear sturdy, over-the-ankle shoes, rather than sneakers or sandals. Boots provide the best protection and offer additional ankle support.

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## Carrying a Passenger

Before carrying a passenger on your motorcycle, you should have enough experience to feel confident about riding on your own. It is important to understand that carrying a passenger dramatically changes the handling characteristics of any motorcycle. Practice carrying a passenger in a controlled area, like an isolated parking lot, before trying to ride double on a public street for the first time.

Your passenger should wear the same riding gear as you do, and he or she *must* wear a US DOT standard helmet and eye protection. Your passenger should sit behind you on the motorcycle and never ride sidesaddle. Your motorcycle must have separate footrests, a handstrap, and a securely fastened passenger seat, unless it has a sidecar that is designed to carry a passenger.

**If you have a Class M learner's permit, not a full license, you may *not* carry a passenger on your motorcycle.**

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## Rider Training

More than 90 percent of the motorcyclists involved in crashes either teach themselves to ride their motorcycles or learned from family or friends. To help reduce the number of motorcycle-related fatalities and injuries, it is strongly recommended that you seek professional, licensed motorcycle riding instruction before pursuing your Class M driver's license.

The Registry of Motor Vehicles sponsors the Massachusetts Rider Education Program (MREP). Beginner and experienced rider courses are available, and graduates of both courses are exempt from the RMV's road test for a Class M license.

**For information on motorcycle rider courses for both beginner and experienced drivers, call 617-351-9585 or visit [www.mass.gov/rmv](http://www.mass.gov/rmv).**

**For specific questions, call 413-781-0633 to speak to the program coordinator.**

**A course certificate entitles you to a limited ten percent discount on your motorcycle insurance.**

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## Moped Safety

Under Massachusetts law, mopeds fall into the category of "motorized bicycles" (with or without pedals) and are therefore regulated by driver's license rules. You must have a valid driver's license or learner's permit to operate a moped. The following rules apply when operating a moped:

- You may not drive at a speed greater than 25 mph.
- You may not ride on limited-access or express state highways where specific prohibitions against bicycles are posted.
- You must use the proper hand signals before stopping or turning. New mopeds may have electronic turn signals.
- While you may use bicycle lanes along roadways, you may not ride on off-street recreational paths.
- You and any passenger must wear helmets that meet or exceed the US DOT standard.
- You may not carry a passenger if you are operating on a permit.

**To comply with state law, a rider and any passenger must wear a helmet that meets or exceeds US DOT standards.**

## **Motorized Scooter Safety**

Motorized Scooters are considered “motor vehicles” under Massachusetts law. You must have a valid driver’s license or learner’s permit to operate a motorized scooter, and can be issued citations for violation of motor vehicle laws.

The following rules apply when operating a motorized scooter:

- You must wear a helmet that meets or exceeds the US DOT standard.
- You may not drive at a speed greater than twenty miles per hour (20 m.p.h.).
- Motorized Scooters may be operated on all public ways (except limited access or express state highways where signs prohibiting bicycles or scooters have been posted).
- You are subject to all state traffic laws and regulations, except that the operator must keep to the right side of the road at all times, including when passing a motor vehicle which is moving in the travel lane of the way.
- You must signal when stopping or turning.
- Motorized Scooters may not be operated upon any way after sunset or before sunrise.
- You may not carry a passenger on a Motorized Scooter.

Any violation is subject to a fine of up to \$25 (1st Offense); \$25-\$50 (2nd Offense); \$50-\$100 (3rd + Offense).

**All fees are subject to change at any time.**

