

### Before you begin

1. Identify all vehicle-related activities your organization uses.
2. Identify all vehicle incidents or near incidents that have occurred within the past five years.  
You may want to ask others for their thoughts in preparation.
3. Have a flip chart or whiteboard available to capture the discussion points and answers to questions.
4. Use a question-and-answer format that encourages participation and involves the group in the discussion.



### Introduction

Driving is risky business. People young and old, blue-collar workers and company presidents are in control of lethal weapons when they drive on our roadways.

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) reports there are on average 6.5 million police-reported vehicle accidents per year resulting in 35,000 deaths. The good news is we can reduce our risks by driving well-maintained vehicles and improving our driving habits.

### Definitions

Defensive driving includes driving methods or guidelines that reduce the risk of motor vehicle accidents. It also considers factors such as vehicle condition, weather conditions, traffic conditions, vehicle stopping distances, driver distractions, other vehicles, and pedestrians.

## Discussion

The definition of **defensive driving** lists seven factors to consider. Discuss how each factor increases the risk of a motor vehicle accident and have the group share methods or techniques to help mitigate those risks. As you go through each factor, ask the group to name examples and share their observations and suggestions. Use the examples included with each factor below to help you lead your discussion.

**Vehicle condition:** What vehicle conditions may contribute to distracted driving? How will these vehicle conditions impact driving? Examples include bald tires, dull wipers, no wiper fluid, signals not functioning, one or both headlights burnt out, defrost not working, windows obstructed, etc.

How should we evaluate and correct these vehicle conditions? Examples: pre-trip checks, regularly scheduled maintenance, etc. Discuss your vehicle maintenance and pre-trip inspection policy. Clearly define your expectations for ensuring a well-maintained vehicle.

**Weather conditions:** Discuss various weather conditions and how those conditions impact driving. Examples include heavy rain, snow, ice, wind, etc. Discuss what drivers should do in these conditions. For example, drivers should reduce speed (below the speed limit is advisable), stop using cruise control, lengthen the distance between themselves and the vehicle ahead of them, increase travel time (leave earlier), and consider cancelling the trip for extreme weather.

Review the different levels of snow emergencies. At which level are roads shut down, at which level should your employees cancel their road trip? Discuss your policy and expectations for driving in poor weather conditions.

**Traffic conditions:** Discuss traffic conditions and how conditions impact driving. Heavy traffic makes it more difficult to keep safe distances between vehicles, it increases travel time, and it increases stress.

Discuss techniques for driving safely in heavy traffic. Some examples include reducing speeds, always using turn signals when changing lanes, avoiding aggressive drivers (let them pass), keeping a safe distance between vehicles, and using deep breaths to reduce stress. Also, be courteous and allow fellow motorists to change lanes but be on the lookout for unexpected lane changes.

**Vehicle stopping distance:** Discuss what factors impact stopping distance. Stopping distances are affected by speed, weight of vehicle, road conditions, tire conditions, and driver reaction time. Discuss how to assess stopping distances and discuss what are safe distances between vehicles considering all the factors discussed. As a rule of thumb, keep at least 3 seconds between you and the vehicle in front — increase this distance for higher speeds, inclement weather, and for large or heavy vehicles.

**Driver distractions:** Discuss the two biggest myths when it comes to distracted driving.

- Myth 1: Brains are good at multi-tasking. Research says our brains are terrible at multi-tasking. We must focus on one activity. When driving, we must stay focused and engaged with driving only.
- Myth 2: Hands-free phone use is safe. Not true. Research shows that hands-free use of phones does increase our time to react and thus increases risk of motor vehicle accidents.

Ask the group to share driver distractions and write these on your whiteboard.

Examples include talking on phone or talking to fellow passengers, eating or drinking, navigation systems, texting, infotainment systems, music, applying makeup, shaving, mental lapses (i.e., your mind is lost in thought and not engaged with driving), etc.

Discuss how you can combat or minimize these distractions. At a minimum, the driver should pull over to a safe location to make phone calls, send a text, enter addresses in navigation systems, or any similar activity that takes their eyes off the road.

**Other vehicles:** Discuss the ways other vehicles increase risk and how we should minimize those risks. Examples include other vehicles weaving into and out of lanes, following too closely or tailgating, speeding, passing on the right, driving slowly in the passing lane, failing to yield the right of way, excessively braking, etc.

Ask the group to share stories of other drivers. What was the other vehicle doing? How did other drivers affect their driving — did they drive more aggressively — were they embarrassed by their reaction — how should they have reacted?

It is best to not engage with other drivers. Simply yield to aggressive drivers by letting them pass you without making eye contact or taking part in their antics. Pass slow drivers when it is safe to do so. Ask the group to share techniques for safely managing poor driving of other vehicles.

**Pedestrians:** Whether pedestrians are walking in the road, in a crosswalk, waiting to cross, or sharing the road they should always be approached with caution. Be prepared for the unexpected as pedestrians are unpredictable. Reduce your speed, glance ahead, check mirrors, and use your turn signals. Give pedestrians the widest berth possible and be prepared to brake. At crosswalks, make eye contact and communicate with your eyes or friendly gestures when you are yielding the right of way. Stop your vehicle before the stop sign rather than in the crosswalk.

## Conclusion

Driving vehicles that weigh several thousand pounds at high speeds is a dangerous activity that requires our full attention. Defensive driving involves controlling the factors that affect driving for the safest possible outcome. Friendly and regular reminders will increase awareness and reduce complacency while driving. Engage your employees on a regular basis through discussion and by supplying friendly reminders to help them develop good driving habits. We all travel the roadways, so let's encourage each other to drive responsibly. Driving is not a right, it's a privilege.

## Group activity

Have an employee walk through a pre-check vehicle inspection. Discuss what to do when items are found deficient (i.e., what can be fixed by the employee or what requires a qualified mechanic to fix).

Send electronic communications or post at least one driver safety tip/message each month. Give the employees credit by using the tips they provided during this discussion. Also share news clips or videos relaying stories of preventable motor vehicle accidents.

## Resources

OSHA: Safety and Health Topics — Motor Vehicle Safety <https://www.osha.gov/SLTC/motorvehiclesafety/index.html>

CDC: Motor Vehicle Safety <https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/index.html>

MedlinePlus: Motor Vehicle Safety <https://medlineplus.gov/motorvehiclesafety.html>

Ohio BMV: Digest of Motor Vehicle Laws <https://www.bmv.ohio.gov/forms-general.aspx#gsc.tab=0>