
Safe driving

Summary

- Safe driving is up to every individual on the road.
 - Safe drivers are alert and ready to take action at any time.
 - It is illegal to drive if your blood alcohol concentration is 0.05 or over. And you cannot drive if you have used recreational drugs such as cannabis.
 - The driver is responsible for ensuring all passengers have an age-appropriate restraint.
 - Be courteous to all road users – other drivers, pedestrians and cyclists.
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We all share the road, so we are all responsible for driving safely. Being a safe driver means being alert, always driving to the conditions of the road environment and being ready to take action at any time.

Whether you be an experienced, older or new driver, a passenger, bike rider or pedestrian, read on for tips for keeping everyone safe on the road.

Safe driving tips

How familiar are you with the road rules? It may sound like a silly question, but road rules are routinely reviewed and updated. And if it's a long time since you got your licence, you may have forgotten some.

Some commonly misunderstood road rules include:

- giving way at intersections
- giving way at roundabouts
- giving way to emergency vehicles
- giving way to pedestrians
- merging lanes safely
- passing or overtaking trams
- performing a hook turn.

You can brush up on seven of Victoria's most commonly misunderstood road rules on the [VicRoads website](#).

Here are some other ways to keep yourself and others safe while you're driving.

Be aware of your surroundings when driving

Being aware of what is going on around you can help you avoid crashes. To improve your own road safety:

- **Check your mirrors and adjust them, if necessary, every time you drive.** Glance regularly in the rear and side mirrors so you can see what is happening behind and beside you. This is especially important when you are overtaking and changing lanes.
- **Do a head check to check** your blind spots when you want to change lanes, pull out from the kerb, turn, or temporarily enter a bicycle or bus lane. That is, turn your head to the left and the right, and quickly look over your shoulder, to ensure there are no vehicles where you want to move to. A head check can also be a life saver when you are getting into and out of your vehicle. Check that no vehicles or bike riders will be at risk when you open your door.
- **Take care in car parks, and near trams and buses too.** People can be hard to see and can behave unpredictably, especially children, so drive at a safe speed and be prepared to take evasive action if necessary.
- **Keep a safe distance from the car in front of you.** Under ideal conditions, VicRoads recommends a two-

second gap between you and the vehicle in front. But in wet weather and at night you should extend that distance to four seconds. This is also the case if you're less experienced, tired, towing or if you're carrying a heavy load. (To work out this distance, choose something beside the road. When the back of the car in front passes this object, count 'one thousand and one, one thousand and two'. Your car should then reach the object. That's a two-second gap.)

- **Have your headlights on low beam during the day**, to reduce your risk of a crash. Always use low beam headlights when it is raining and in conditions with reduced visibility.
- **Try not to drive at times when you would usually be asleep**, or at night on unlit roads. If you do have to drive at these times, try to keep the journey as short as possible.
- **Share the driving over long distances, and take frequent breaks** – at least every two hours.
- **Try not to drive if you are feeling unwell**. If it cannot be avoided, try to drive when there are fewer cars on the road, be especially alert, and try to use routes that use traffic lights.
- **Keep left unless over overtaking**. Stay out of the right lane when driving on a multi-lane road with a speed limit of more than 80 kilometres per hour or where a 'Keep Left Unless Overtaking' sign applies (unless you are overtaking). A multi-lane road is a road with two or more marked traffic lanes in the same direction.

Speed and safe driving

The speed limit is the maximum speed at which you can drive in an area, so be sure you're travelling below that limit. Go even slower if: there are lots of pedestrians or bike riders around, there is poor visibility or wet weather, or you're unfamiliar with the road. If you are driving slower because you are unfamiliar with the road, keep left so that other drivers can pass you safely.

Driving above the speed limit or driving too fast for the road and weather conditions is a major cause of crashes. Speed limits are enforced throughout Victoria for the safety of all road users, and drivers exceeding the speed limit can receive fines, demerit points or have their licence suspended or cancelled.

Remember, speed limit signs are not displayed on all roads. Where speed limit signs are not installed, the default speed limit is always in effect. In built-up areas, the default speed limit is 50 kilometres per hour and on country roads outside of built-up areas, the default speed limit is 100 kilometres per hour.

On multi-lane roads, drive in the left lane where possible so other vehicles can pass you, and be aware of shopping strips, school speed zones, road works and other situations that may require you to adjust your speed accordingly.

Alcohol and safe driving

Alcohol is a major factor in road deaths in Victoria. About 20 per cent of drivers killed each year have a **blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of over 0.05 (the legal limit)**. So if you are going to drink, make the decision not to drive.

If your blood alcohol concentration (BAC) is at 0.05, your risk of being in a crash is about double that of having no alcohol in your system. The higher your BAC, the more likely you are to be involved in a serious crash.

If you have consumed alcohol, give your body time to process the alcohol before you get behind the wheel. You cannot speed up the process by drinking coffee, showering, exercising, having fresh air, or vomiting. The only thing that helps is time.

Do not assume your blood alcohol level will be the same as your friend's if you have both had the same amount to drink. People metabolise alcohol differently. Smaller people will have a higher blood alcohol reading than larger people, and higher body fat will often mean a higher reading. A woman will usually have a higher reading than a man of similar size.

Make the decision not to drive if you plan to drink alcohol; it is always safer to separate your drinking from driving. VicRoads offers these **tips for managing your alcohol intake if you must drive**:

- plan ahead and confirm who is going to be the designated driver if you are sharing car travel
- start with a soft drink or water
- learn about what constitutes a standard drink, and how long it takes to leave your system
- alternate between alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks

- choose drinks with lower alcohol content
 - avoid mixed drinks
 - avoid drinking in 'shouts'
 - don't let people top up your glass
 - drink slowly and keep track of how much you've had to drink
 - set time and dollar limits on your drinking
 - do not drive the morning after having multiple drinks the night before as you may still be over the legal limit.
 - Remember, drinking alcohol while you are driving a vehicle or while you are supervising someone who is learning to drive a vehicle is also illegal.
- Better Health Channel has more information on the risks of **drinking and driving**.

Drugs and safe driving

It is illegal to drive with any illicit drug in your system, including cannabis, methamphetamine (ice) and MDMA (ecstasy). There is no safe amount. This is because illicit drugs can affect your ability to concentrate, your level of alertness, your coordination, your judgement, and your reaction time.

In fact, with cannabis in your system, your risk of being in a **fatal crash** is similar to a driver with a blood alcohol concentration of up to 0.15 – three times the legal limit. Drivers who combine illicit drugs and alcohol put themselves and others on the road at an even higher risk.

It can be difficult to know how long it takes for drugs to be fully metabolised by the body. Cannabis can be detected for at least several hours and amphetamines can be detected for at least 24 hours. However, much like alcohol, there is a range of factors that could increase the length of time it can take for drugs to be fully metabolised in your body.

The possible penalties for driving with illicit drugs in your system include having your licence cancelled, fines and time in jail. Police use random drug testing to check drivers for illicit drugs.

Fatigue and safe driving

Did you know that if you drive when you're tired, you significantly increase your chances of being in a crash? **Fatigue contributes to more than 20 per cent of all road accidents in Victoria.**

If you begin to feel tired while driving, the best thing to do is pull over and take a power nap. Better still, avoid driving tired by ensuring you get enough sleep, not starting a long journey after a day's work, taking regular breaks and eating well-balanced meals.

Being well hydrated and taking water with you on your journey is also important to maintain your wellbeing while driving.

Medical conditions and safe driving

Drivers of any age that have a long-term or permanent physical or mental condition that may affect their ability to drive, have a legal obligation to notify VicRoads. If you fail to do so you may be placing yourself and others at risk, jeopardising your insurance, or facing fines and the loss of your licence.

VicRoads is responsible for ensuring that all drivers are fit to drive, and can support drivers with health conditions and disabilities to continue to drive so long as they are safe to do so – for example via vehicle modifications (like steering aides and hand-controls) and local area only licences.

For more information, visit the VicRoads page on **Medical conditions and driving**.

Medications and safe driving

Some medications could make you drowsy and dangerous on the road. So if you take any medication, read the label carefully and obey any instructions and warnings related to driving.

Always ask your health practitioner about how your medication will affect your ability to drive. It is especially important to discuss this with your health practitioner if you are taking multiple medications as they can interact with each other to affect you in different ways.

Safe driving tips for older drivers

In Victoria, drivers can retain their driver licence to any age, so long as they are safe to do so. Drivers aged 75 years and over are generally regarded as older drivers. Older drivers can be as safe as other age groups on the road. However, due to frailty and other health conditions, they may be more likely to suffer injuries, have prolonged recovery times or die as a result of road trauma.

You don't have to pass a licence test when you reach a certain age in Victoria, but it's good to be aware of **changes that could affect your ability to drive**, and adjust your behaviour accordingly.

For some people, those changes occur well before their 75th birthday, while others can be fine to drive into their eighties. The best way to decide when you should change your driving behaviour is to ask your doctor for advice about the effect that any illness, disability or medical condition may have on your ability to drive safely, including any medicines you may be taking. Listen to the advice of family and friends, too.

It's also a good idea to develop confidence using other modes of transport which might help reduce your reliance on car transport and also help to keep you fit and healthy (such as the train, bus or walking).

For more information for **older drivers** and **health**, visit the **VicRoads website**.

Tips for younger drivers

Younger drivers are overrepresented in road trauma statistics. In their first year of driving, **young drivers are nearly four times more likely to be involved in a fatal or serious injury crash** compared to more experienced drivers.

You can reduce the risks by being well prepared by the time you get your licence. You must get at least 120 hours of driving practice on the road as a learner driver, in all types of conditions, before you apply for your licence.

Other tips include:

- Never drive if you have been drinking or taking drugs (it is illegal for learner and probationary drivers to have any alcohol in their system).
- Ensure all your passengers are wearing seatbelts at all times.
- Never exceed the speed limit.
- Never engage in deliberate risk-taking behaviour.
- Practice slowing down for hazards well before you reach them, so you are always in control of your vehicle.
- Try not to drive at night at first, unless you have an experienced driver with you.
- Don't drive if you've been awake for 18 hours or more.

For more **information for younger drivers**, see the VicRoads website.

Distraction and mobile phone use when driving

Any form of distraction while driving increases your risk of having a crash. Distraction occurs when your attention is diverted away from the task of safe driving and toward some other competing activity. Distraction can result in reduced awareness of your surroundings, slower reactions and riskier decision making.

Any handheld mobile phone use while driving can increase your risk of a crash by up to four times. Texting on your phone while driving increases your risk of a crash by six times. It is against the law for P1, P2 and learner drivers to use their mobile phone for any function while they are driving, or while they are stationary in the car but not parked. This includes the hands-free function.

If you have your full licence, you can only use your mobile phone:

- to make calls and play music if the phone is secured in a commercially designed holder fixed to your vehicle, or
- if you can operate it without touching it, and not have it resting on any part of your body.

You can minimise distractions by turning your phone off when you drive, or putting it on silent and stowing it out of reach. The VicRoads website has more information about **mobile phones and driving**.

Tips for keeping passengers safe when driving

Safe driving with passengers means everyone travelling in your vehicle must wear the appropriate seatbelt or restraint. As the driver, you are legally responsible for ensuring they do so. Police can impound (seize) your car if you are carrying too many passengers for the number of seatbelts in the vehicle.

The type of restraint each passenger should use depends on their age. Drivers and passengers aged 16 years and over must wear a seatbelt, while passengers aged under 16 years should use a restraint or seatbelt that is appropriate for their size.

For example, the road rules state that a seven-year-old is legally allowed to wear an adult seatbelt, but if they are small in stature (less than 145cm), they will not achieve a good fit by using the car's seatbelt, and in a crash, significant internal injuries can occur. The child would be safer in a booster seat.

Safe driving – children and front seat travel

Although the road rules allow children seven years and above to sit in the front seat, the back seat is the safest place for children to be. As a rule of thumb, only place a child in the front seat if all of the seats in the back row(s) are occupied with smaller children.

See [VicRoads for age-appropriate child restraint information](#).

Safe driving with dogs

Restraining any dogs in your vehicle can also make your journey safer, preventing the dog from distracting the driver, as well as minimising the dog's chances of getting hurt if you have an accident.

Sharing the road with other drivers

Safe drivers understand they have to share the road – with other drivers, pedestrians and cyclists. They know they can't control all situations – but they know they can control their reactions to situations.

On the road, as everywhere in life, a little courtesy to those around you goes a long way. So, here are some other things to remember when you're out on the road:

- Don't drive slowly in the right-hand lane.
- Don't prevent other vehicles from overtaking.
- Avoid cutting in on others, especially trucks.
- Don't block intersections.
- Use indicators to allow plenty of warning.
- Acknowledge any mistakes you make, and don't retaliate against other drivers.
- If a driver is courteous to you, a little wave to say thanks goes a very long way.

Safe driving and pedestrians

You have to slow down, STOP and give way to pedestrians on pedestrian crossings, and you can't overtake a vehicle that is stopped at a pedestrian crossing. You should also always approach pedestrian crossings at a speed that will allow you to stop in time if you need to.

When turning at an intersection you must slow down and give way to pedestrians crossing the road you're entering. At roundabouts you should keep an eye out for pedestrians needing to cross, and slow down accordingly to allow them time to do so.

You must also slow down and give way to pedestrians when you are pulling out of or into a driveway or private property, and slow down and give way to pedestrians who are crossing a slip lane.

You must also stop to allow pedestrians get onto or out of a stationary tram, and stay at the back of the tram until all pedestrians have cleared and the doors have closed.

Shared zones require you to give way to pedestrians at all times, and you must allow pedestrians and cyclists to cross in front of you at stop signs.

A small change in your speed can be the difference between life and death for pedestrians. A pedestrian has little chance of surviving impact with a car travelling at 60 kilometres per hour, but a car travelling at 50 kilometres per hour gives a pedestrian a 60 per cent chance of survival. The slower the speed the safer it is for pedestrians; this

is why school zones and other high-volume pedestrian areas have a speed limit of 40 kilometres per hour.

Be aware of your speed and surroundings at all times.

Safe driving and bike riders

Sharing the road responsibly with bike riders makes everyone safer. Give bike riders a clearance of at least one metre when passing – more if you're travelling at over 60 kilometres per hour.

Don't drive in bike lanes, and check for bike riders before opening your car door or pulling out into traffic. Remind your passengers to be careful when opening their car door also.

Indicate when pulling out, changing lanes or turning, and always give way to bike riders if you have to enter or cross a bike lane or have to change lanes and the one you are entering has a bike rider already in it.

Remember...

- Safe driving is up to every individual on the road.
- Safe drivers drive to the conditions, and are alert and ready to take action at any time.
- Separate drinking alcohol from your driving and do not drive if you have used illicit drugs such as cannabis.
- The driver of a vehicle is responsible for ensuring that all passengers are appropriately restrained.
- Share the road responsibly by being courteous and aware of all road users – other drivers, pedestrians and bike riders. Being respectful and tolerant while driving improves the experience of using the roads for all road users.

Where to get help

- VicRoads:
 - for more information on **safe driving**
 - for the **A to Z of road rules**
- **Drivesmart** – for tips for young drivers.

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