

## **Safe Driving For Every Season**

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### **Introduction**

Have you ever heard of an affliction known as “Seasonal Driving Amnesia” (SDA)? Don’t feel bad if you haven’t; it was “invented” for the purposes of this article. However, just because it was made up does not mean that it doesn’t really exist. Think about it. For those of you who drive in areas that receive snow, have you ever noticed that there are an inordinate number of vehicle crashes during the first snowfall of the season? Why does this happen!? Do people forget how to drive in the snow from one year to the next? Do they forget that, when the roads are slippery, they need to slow down and leave a greater following distance? There is a case here to substantiate the existence of SDA.

In reality, there are specific driving dangers and challenges associated with all four of the seasons. This article covers each of these seasonal issues and provides solutions that will help drivers remain safe throughout the entire year.

#### **Spring**

Spring is such a wonderful time of year. For many, this is the season of renewal. The weather is getting warmer, flowers are blooming, the rain is falling and, as a result, cars are hydroplaning. Spring brings a set of specific driving dangers and challenges.

#### ***Rain***

April showers bring May flowers and hazardous driving conditions. The steady and prolonged rainstorms associated with spring create challenges on the roadways. Each of these will be addressed separately.

#### ***Lights***

Many vehicles have daytime running lights (DRLs). This is fantastic. Having lights on in the front of the vehicle decreases the risk of a vehicle-to-vehicle daytime frontal collision by 25%. If you do not have DRLs, turn on your headlights. If you have a vehicle that has the “auto” position on your light switch, you need to be cautious during inclement weather. If you have an “auto” position, all you need to do is place the switch in this position and the lights turn on automatically when it begins to get dark. There is a sensor on the dashboard that detects darkening conditions and automatically turns on the vehicle’s headlights and taillights. What you need to be aware of is that, during normal lighting conditions, only the DRLs will be illuminated in the front of the vehicle. If it begins to rain, or if there is fog, it may not get dark enough for all of the lights to

turn on automatically. In bad weather, you definitely want your taillights lit. You want to be visible to those who are approaching from behind. A simple rule to follow is: Wipers on/Light switch on. For those areas that have a “lights on during bad weather” law, DRLs do not fulfill the requirement. You must turn on all of your lights.

### *Wipers*

Most drivers realize that they need to replace their wiper blades when they turn on their wipers and they aren't getting the job done. There are streaks and gaps and the wipers are jumping across the windshield like a squirrel that has just downed a double-shot espresso. Typically, the next time that these same drivers remember that they need to replace their wipers is the next time it rains and they can't see a thing. Get into the habit of replacing your wipers at the beginning of each season. By doing so, you will be assured that you will be able to see where you are going when there is bad weather. This will help you avoid all of those other drivers with worn out wiper blades.

### *Tires*

If we all lived in areas where we always had dry clean road surfaces to drive on, the safest tires we could have on our vehicles would be racing slicks; in other words, smooth tires that have no tread. These tires provide a greater amount of tire to road surface contact and therefore provide more traction. The reason we have tread on our tires is because we do have to drive in rain, fog, slush and snow. The tread design helps the tire to cut through and dissipate the moisture, snow, mud, slush etc. This tread design will only work properly if the tire is inflated properly. Check your owner's manual, the inside of the vehicle's door jam, or the sidewall of the tire to determine what the proper air pressure is. To avoid a false high reading, always check the tire when it is cold. Considering that a tire's air pressure can change with the hit of every chuck hole on the road, it is important to get into the habit of checking your vehicle's tire air pressure on a weekly basis. Also, you want to be certain that the depth of the tread is sufficient. You may have heard of using a typical U.S. penny to check the tread depth. If you place the penny into the tire tread and the top Lincoln's head is exposed, there is not enough tread for the tire to work effectively in bad weather. Replace that tire.

### *Hydroplaning*

Hydroplaning occurs when one, two, three or all four of your vehicle's tires ride on top of the water, thus losing contact with the road surface. If all four of your tires are hydroplaning, unless you have a rudder for your vehicle, you have lost control. The two tires that typically hydroplane first are the front tires. This stands to reason, considering that they are the first to encounter the water. The rear tires usually track behind the front tires after the water has been dissipated by the front tires.

Hydroplaning occurs for a number of reasons. The most common cause of hydroplaning is speed. The faster a vehicle travels, the more water it encounters and the less time the tread has to disperse the water. A simple solution is to slow down. This seems simple enough. However, the mistake that many drivers make is not allowing more time to arrive at their destinations when it is raining. As a result, they will drive at the same speed on the wet road as they would on a dry road. To make matters worse, in the likely event of a weather-related crash, the traffic is going to be backed up, and once the driver clears the crash area, will now drive even faster to make up for the time lost due to the heavy traffic. All of this was probably created by a driver who failed to allow more travel time, even though it was raining. It's all one big, ongoing weather-related crash zone.

Another reason hydroplaning occurs is due to improperly inflated tires. As stated earlier, it is very important to check the vehicle's tire pressure. If a tire is underinflated, the center of the tire will suck in allowing only the edges to touch. If the tire is over inflated, only the center of the tire will make contact.

High water is another reason why vehicles hydroplane. Avoid driving in puddled areas, especially at higher speeds. Scan well ahead and look for water being thrown up by other vehicles in order to determine where these areas of high water are located.

Do not use cruise control when it is raining. If a vehicle hydroplanes, and the cruise control is set, it may give the cruise control a false reading and the vehicle will actually accelerate at a time when power should be decreased to the drive wheels of the vehicle.

If you find yourself in a hydroplane, come off the gas, do not over steer the vehicle and reduce your speed gently. You do not want to apply heavy brake pressure. Stab lightly at the brakes in quick successions in order to reduce the vehicle's speed.

### *Allergies*

Another challenge created by the spring season is allergies. Every year, there are reported instances of "sneeze accidents." These collisions occur when a driver experiences a series of sneezes in a row while they are driving. Drivers involved in these incidents have been known to swerve off the road, into other traffic lanes and have struck other vehicles from behind. If you find yourself sneezing, try to hold the wheel steady and avoid any unintended quick steering maneuvers.

Another situation that is created by allergies is impaired driving due to allergy medications. These medications may be purchased over the counter or they may be prescribed medications. Either way, they can, and do cause impairment behind the wheel. Many drivers are surprised that they can be charged for driving under the influence by simply taking an allergy medication. Read all warnings on all medications. Ask your doctor or pharmacist about the risk of impairment. Lastly, if you are taking a medication for the first time, take it at a time when you do not have to drive. You want to see what effect the medication has on you prior to getting behind the wheel.

### Summer

AHHH—The good old summertime! For many, this is the time for vacation. The time of year when you can get away from work and get some much needed rest and relaxation. You spend time with your family and recharge your battery. This is also a time for drunk driving due to summer holidays, sporting events and backyard barbeques. During the summer you can also count on sudden and severe weather, more pedestrians on the roads and fatigue-related crashes. Not exactly a Beach Boys song, but it is the reality of this season.

### *Vacation*

Driver safety typically does not come to mind when people are thinking of vacation. However, understanding the risks associated with driving to, from and while on vacation can prevent a vacation from turning into a nightmare.

### *Fatigue*

There are many drivers who, when driving to a vacation destination, refuse to stop for a rest. They believe that any time spent stopping will decrease the amount of their expected vacation “fun” time. The fact that the rest of their family requires a much-needed break means nothing to this marathon driver. This is not only inconsiderate; it is just plain unsafe. Fatigue can come upon a driver very rapidly. A fatigued driver is just as dangerous as an alcohol, or drug-impaired driver. There are a number of tricks fatigued drivers will utilize in order to combat their impaired condition. Rolling the windows down and turning the air conditioning to the arctic setting, turning up music to high levels, and consuming mass quantities of caffeinated beverages are all very common. Drivers who utilize these methods are commonly cold, suffer hearing loss and urgently need to utilize restroom facilities, but they are still tired. The only true way to combat fatigue is to rest. If you have not had enough sleep, do not drive. Even if you have had enough rest, you should stop at least every two hours. Some will argue that, if they stop that often, they will never get to their destination. If they don’t stop, they may very well not arrive at their destination at all. Vacation crashes related to fatigue are unfortunately all too common.

### *Sudden and Severe Weather*

Summer thunderstorms create obvious and unique driving hazards. If you encounter a torrential downpour, turn your light switch to the full on position, slow down, and consider finding a safe place to legally park. Get off the road at the nearest exit and find a safe parking lot to sit in until the storm blows over. For obvious safety reasons, do not park under trees and power lines. Avoid stopping along the side of the road. Crashes occur when other drivers see vehicles on the side of the road, and due to the decreased sight distance caused by the storm, assume that this is a travel lane. If conditions are so severe that you are having difficulty seeing the hood of your vehicle, you must understand that other drivers are going to have trouble seeing you. In these conditions consider turning on your vehicle’s emergency flashers. Some areas have laws that forbid the use of emergency flashers while driving. Common sense must prevail here. Consider your conditions and decide what the safest course of action is.

### *Summer Events and Alcohol*

Parties, picnics and sporting events are very common summer activities. For many of these, alcohol is included as the beverage of choice. As a society, we are geared towards this. Think of all of the advertisements that depict people at summertime gatherings having a great time as they drink down icy cold alcoholic beverages. They all appear to be having the time of their lives, and the beverages play a large role in these fun festivities. At the end of many of these advertisements, there is a quick statement that tells us to “Please drink responsibly.” These notices are similar to car alarms; nobody pays attention to them. Every driver has to make the decision to not drink and drive. It is truly a personal decision. The difficulty with summertime gatherings is that consuming alcoholic beverages is the norm. Many people feel left out if they don’t participate. This leads to drunk driving, and this leads to motor vehicle crashes and all of the associated hardships.

Judgment is one of the first things affected by alcohol. There are numerous accounts of people who become aggressive and loud after drinking. These people won’t back down and have been known to pick on the biggest, meanest and strongest person they can find. Many times these people have their heads handed to them, but at the time, due to their alcohol related impaired judgment, these inebriated pugilists actually thought they would win. The same is true with impaired judgment regarding driving. People who drink think that they are capable of safe

driving. They think they are “all right” to drive. This is the alcohol talking. Considering that judgment is impaired as soon as we begin to drink, arrangements need to be made prior to the first drink. Plan to stay at the location of the event, have a designated driver, or have it arranged that a cab will be called for you. If you are hosting an event, it is your responsibility to make sure others do not attempt to drive after they have consumed alcohol. Let your guests know ahead of time that this is a requirement at your event.

As drivers, we need to be on the lookout for impaired drivers. This is especially true during the holidays and when driving in the vicinity of sports venues. If you see any of the following driving activities, it is very possible that you are witnessing a drunk driver:

- Weaving within a lane from the center line to side marker line
- Fluctuations in speed for no apparent reason
- Erratic braking
- Last-second stops for red lights and stop signs
- Failure to pull away when a light turns green
- Cutting corners wide and cutting corners short
- Failure to dim high beam lights at night
- Driving with no lights or just parking lights at night
- Tailgating you and following your every move

If you spot a suspected drunk driver, and they are in front of you, keep them there. You do not want to pass a suspected impaired driver. If they are in front of you, they can't hit you. If you want to notify the police, pull off to a safe place and provide a description of the vehicle and the route of travel. Do not get too close. Drunk drivers are dangerous and unpredictable.

#### *Motorcycles, Bicycles and Pedestrians*

With warm weather, there is an increase in the number of motorcyclists, bicyclists and pedestrians using our streets. The best advice that can be given to avoid conflict with these individuals is to look more than once. In other words, when you come to an intersection, get into the habit of scanning often to make sure that you have not missed seeing an approaching motorcycle, bicycle or pedestrian. They are much harder to see than a typical car, and they may blend into the surroundings. Be aware of this and be diligent. Also, use caution when driving in areas where there may be increased pedestrian activity, such as parks and pool areas.

#### Autumn

Fall is such a wonderful time of year. For many there is a change in the weather. The leaves are changing, there is a crisp coolness in the air and the holiday season is approaching. This season also means that school is back in session, leaves are on the roadways, frost is on windshields, and the deer are on the move.

#### *Schools in*

This means buses, increased pedestrian traffic in school zones and overloaded and stressed schedules for parents that have children who are involved in school activities.

Learn the school bus routes in the areas where you drive. Plan your route accordingly so that you can avoid getting behind a bus that makes frequent stops to pick up and drop off school

students. Besides not being delayed by the bus, you can avoid the inevitable likelihood of a kid in the back seat of the bus making faces at you.

Watch for children going to and from school. Many times they are distracted by one another and they may not be doing everything necessary in order to remain safe. Use extra caution.

If you are the parent of a child who is involved in school activities, you understand the stress associated with making sure that the kids are dropped off and picked up from their activities in a timely manner. If you have more than one child involved with school activities, you may want to consider being cloned. Since cloning is not a viable solution, consider arranging your work schedule so that you minimize those times where schedules are tight. Also, enlist the help of relatives, neighbors and other parents. You cannot be at two places at once. Ask for help.

### *Leaves*

The fall foliage is very pleasant to look at. However, when the leaves begin to fall they can mix with moisture on the roadway and create slick conditions. Be aware of this and adjust your driving accordingly. Slow down on curves where there are overhanging trees and watch for leaf-covered intersections where it may be difficult to stop.

### *Frost*

Frost on vehicle windows drastically cuts down on visibility. The obvious solution is to scrape your windows and/or let the vehicle run until they are defrosted. However, how many times have you seen somebody driving down the road with the only cleared-off area directly in front of the driver, and it is about the size of an orange? Take the time to clear your windows. Get up earlier if you have to make sure you have the time to accomplish this task. The few minutes it takes to clear off the windows of your vehicle could save you or someone else a life.

### *Deer*

Autumn is the time of year when deer go into rut. In other words, this is their breeding season. During this time, they are more active, and, as a result, they are on roadways a great deal more. Also, in many areas, this is the time of year when deer hunting season occurs. This will also cause deer to be on the move. If you encounter a deer on the road, avoid the urge to swerve. Many drivers have become involved in more severe crashes as a result of trying to avoid a deer collision. Slow down in the areas where you know there are higher deer populations. Many times these areas are indicated by deer crossing signs. Use your high beam lights as much as legally possible at night and watch for their reflective eyes. If you see one deer, expect more. They are herd animals.

### Winter

Winter is such a wondrous time. The joys associated with the holidays, the cool weather and all of the year-end events. Winter also brings issues with weather, impaired driving associated with holiday parties", snow birds" and year-end work related pushes.

### *Slipping and Sliding*

With the onset of frozen precipitation, there is an obvious increase for the risk of skid related crashes. There are basically three skids that are associated with winter driving. They are the oversteer, the understeer and the all-wheel skid. Each of these will be addressed separately.

#### *The Oversteer*

This is the situation where the rear of your vehicle spins to the left or right. In this situation, come off the gas and don't touch the brake. Turn your steering wheel in the direction of the skid. In other words, if the rear of your vehicle slides to the right, turn the steering wheel to the right. If it turns to the left, turn the steering wheel to the left. Turn the wheel far enough to bring the vehicle back to a straight path. As soon as the vehicle is straight, recover your steering back to center. This will prevent you from going into a secondary skid.

#### *The Understeer*

An *understeer* occurs when you try to turn your vehicle but the front end plows out in a straight line. This happens at bends in the road, on ramps and when attempting to make turns. In this situation, look where you want to go. This may sound unimportant, but if you look where you want to go, you will react. If you stare at the area where the vehicle is plowing out towards, you may freeze up. Come off the gas. You can attempt to slow down by stabbing lightly at the brake. Do not apply heavy brake pressure and do not oversteer the vehicle.

#### *All-wheel Skid*

This type of skid has been pretty much eliminated now that most vehicles come equipped with anti-lock brakes as standard equipment. An all-wheel skid occurs with a vehicle has standard brakes and a driver applies too much brake pressure and the tires lock up. Simply release brake pressure and the skid will end.

#### *Holiday Parties*

As with summer parties and picnics, winter holiday parties increase the risk of impaired driving. Follow the same guidelines discussed earlier in this article to avoid being an impaired driver and to avoid drunk drivers.

#### *"Snow Birds"*

For those who live in warm weather climates, you probably have an increase in population during the winter months. Just as the robins and geese migrate south, there is a migration of people who head south in order to avoid the cold winter weather of the north. Be aware of this increased traffic, of people who are driving in unfamiliar areas and of drivers who may have reduced skill levels due to age related reductions in hearing, sight and reflexes.

#### *Year-end Push*

For those who drive as part of their work, the end of the year often brings with it an increase in activity in order to meet year-end work demands. This increase in activity can lead to overloaded schedules, and distracted driving. Be realistic with your schedule and remain focused when you are behind the wheel. Understand that the most important task you accomplish each day is arriving home safely.

## **Final Thoughts**

Realizing that every season presents certain challenges, understanding those challenges and preparing accordingly will assist you with being safe. This article pointed out some of the hazards associated with each of the seasons. The areas where you drive may have specific hazards that you need to address. Driving is a skill that must be worked on every time you get behind the wheel. Be diligent, be safe and don't forget that you must adjust your driving to all of the seasonal conditions. You don't want to be accused of being afflicted with SDA.