

AVMA **LIFE**®

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safety bulletin

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"Hitting the road" is just part of doing business for many veterinary practices—especially mobile practices or those that make house calls or treat large animals. But being on the road can pose certain challenges and risks—even for practices that do not own vehicles or regularly travel to treat patients. For example, it is common for employees to run errands on behalf of a practice. That's why it is important for all practices to recognize the risks, take measures to prevent driving-related incidents, and know how to handle adverse situations.

To help you and your team prepare, we've gathered some "back-to-basics" driver safety tips because, when it comes to getting behind the wheel, it pays to be prepared.

Before Hitting the Road

The steps you take before you get behind the wheel of a vehicle can help ensure you arrive safely at your destination—or are prepared for unexpected emergencies along the way. Consider these steps:

- Inspect your vehicle for safety- or maintenance-related issues, such as tire pressure, fuel gauge, windshield fluid, and inoperable lights and signals.



- Gather appropriate documentation, such as insurance, registration, and a blank auto accident report.
- Maintain an inventory list of items in your vehicle in case of an accident.
- Have emergency and first aid supplies on hand, including a reflective vest and a fire extinguisher. In winter weather, carry a heater for medicines and blankets.
- Prepare written directions and contact information in case of signal loss.
- Share your address, intended route, and travel time with a co-worker or family member.
- Ask a co-worker to accompany you whenever possible.
- Plan ahead for patient visits. Bring needed medical supplies, personal protective equipment, appropriate restraints, and staffing. Don't forget to consider the residence, facility, or farm set up.
- Be aware of the weather conditions and any related travel or safety risks. Prepare accordingly.
- Secure animals appropriately prior to transport.

Drive Safely

While you cannot control external factors, you can prepare for them. Defensive driving allows you to protect yourself against possible collisions caused by weather or the behavior of others. Follow these tips for defensive and safe driving:

- Wear your seatbelt and follow posted requirements. Use headlights and signals.
- Ensure mirrors are set and windows are clean.
- Stay focused on the road and keep your hands on the wheel. Avoid using cell phones, eating, or listening to loud music.
- Watch for erratic behavior by other drivers and avoid aggressive drivers.

- Maintain a 4- to 6-car-length following distance.
- Look both directions at intersections and count to three when a light first changes to green.
- Watch for pedestrians or people on bicycles.
- Scan mirrors and windows regularly. Be aware of blind spots and small vehicles such as motorcycles, especially when turning or changing lanes.
- Avoid altercations with aggressive drivers.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration, approximately 21% of vehicle crashes are caused by weather-related issues each year.

Dangerous Driving Situations

Many dangerous driving situations can be avoided by taking inclement weather seriously and, whenever possible, avoiding driving in it. But if you cannot avoid driving in bad weather, consider these tips:

- Maintain control with both hands on the wheel at all times.
- Turn headlights on, slow down, and keep a safe following distance.
- If you start to hydroplane or skid, take your foot off the gas pedal and gently turn into the slide until traction is regained.
- Avoid flooded roads.
- In hailstorms, slow down and seek shelter. The speed of a moving vehicle intensifies the impact.
- Be aware of decreased visibility in rain, fog, and snow. Drive accordingly.
- If at any point visibility or safety is an issue, slow down and pull over to the right, out and away from traffic. Put on hazard lights. Wait for improved conditions before re-entering the road.
- If you spot a funnel cloud, stop and seek shelter away from your vehicle. If indoor options are unavailable, find a low area, away from trees and flying objects, and cover your head with your hands. Avoid bridges and tunnels as shelter options.



Breakdowns and Sudden Emergencies

It's important to be prepared for the unexpected. Knowing what to do in the event of a breakdown or sudden emergency can help reduce your risk of injury or a collision. Below are tips for common mechanical breakdowns or emergency situations.

Flat Tire

- Keep a steady grip on the steering wheel.
- Avoid slamming on the brakes; instead, release the gas pedal to slow down gradually.
- Use your signal and move to the right and exit the road, even if it means driving on a flat tire or rim for a short distance.

Failed Brakes

- Ensure nothing is under the brake pedal.
- Let your foot off the gas pedal, use your signal, and maneuver your vehicle to the right side of the road.
- Do not turn off the vehicle to prevent losing power steering.
- Try pushing the brake all the way down, holding for a moment, then pumping it. Then try shifting to a lower gear or neutral.
- After the vehicle has slowed, gradually employ the emergency brake.
- If none of these strategies work, consider creating friction against a guardrail or curb or slowing the vehicle down gently by steering into an open area of grass, dirt, or light bushes.

After a Breakdown

- Once off the road, apply the parking brake and turn on hazard lights.
- Remain in your vehicle, face forward, and buckled up until help arrives. If it's unsafe to stay in your vehicle, put on your reflective vest and seek a secure location, preferably behind a road barrier or at higher ground, while remaining alert for potential hazards.
- Call for roadside or emergency assistance. Roadside assistance is advisable even for flat tires to avoid the risk of injury or theft.
- Share your location with a supervisor or family member.
- If approached by a stranger, inform them that assistance is on the way.



In the Event of a Collision

Even when you practice safe driving, collisions can occur. When they do, follow these useful tips:

- If possible, move the vehicle to a safe location out of the way of traffic. The shoulder, a nearby exit, or parking lot is not considered leaving the scene of an accident.
- Call for medical attention if anyone is hurt.
- Collect necessary information, including the names and addresses of all drivers and vehicle occupants, license numbers of drivers, insurance policy numbers, as well as the names and addresses of witnesses or anyone injured in the incident.
- Do not discuss fault or sign anything for anyone except a police officer, authorized representative of your practice, or a representative of the practice's auto insurance company.
- No matter how insignificant any damage to your vehicle seems, do not drive until you are certain of the full extent of damage and/or that all safe operating features work.

Safe Arrival

Once you arrive at your destination, consider these tips to close the loop on safety:

- Park visibly, lawfully, and securely. Point front wheels away from the curb when facing uphill and toward the curb when facing downhill or when parked where there are no curbs. Set the parking brake.
- Notify the practice and your client of your arrival and, when it's time to leave, of your departure.
- Evaluate your surroundings. Do not exit the vehicle if you do not feel safe.
- Ensure your vehicle is locked and secure. Do not leave valuable items unattended.
- Do not leave animals in the vehicle.

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