

DEFENSIVE DRIVING BASICS

SCANNING THE ROAD

Safe driving requires a knowledge of what's going on around you at all times. It's more than just a matter of staring at the road ahead. Defensive drivers keep their eyes moving constantly, covering the front, rear, sides and the edge of the road.

Look Around—Not Just Ahead

When you scan the road ahead, observe not just the car in front of you but vehicles in front of that car. Note how close together cars are, whether they are traveling faster or slower than you, and whether there are potential hazards down the road. Get ready to reduce your speed if you see brake lights going on up ahead.

Look to both sides of your car. Be alert for situations that box you in. Adjust your speed so that you are not sandwiched between cars in the lanes on either side of you; you should have an escape route in case there is a collision directly in front of you. Scan the road in all directions before venturing into an intersection.

Think about the place where it's hardest for you to see other cars to the side—usually about half a car length back from the driver's seat. This is your blind spot. Avoid driving in the blind spot of cars to either side of you.

Look to the rear. Use your rear- and sideview mirrors, checking traffic to your rear about every five seconds. Use this information to get out of the way of tailgaters or cars that are bearing down on you at higher speeds. In addition, look over your shoulder when changing lanes.

The Farther the Better

How far ahead should you look? In the city, scan to the next corner in heavy, slow traffic. Scan farther if the traffic is light and moving fast. Note traffic lights and likely spots for pedestrian traffic. Be on the lookout for pedestrians coming from behind parked cars. Anticipate buses, delivery trucks and others double parked in the right lane so you have plenty of time to stop or get around them.

In the country, scan to the next turn in the road. Use this information to adjust your speed so that you can stop if there is a stopped car just around that turn.

Make It a Habit

There's a lot of information within sight when you're scanning the road. Keep your mind clear of distractions so you can process this information and make good driving choices. Once you get into the habit of scanning the road, it will come naturally to you and you will find yourself much more alert to your surroundings.