

DEFENSIVE DRIVING BASICS

MERGING INTO FREEWAY TRAFFIC

The trickiest part of freeway driving is getting onto the freeway, especially if the traffic is heavy and moving fast. When entering the freeway, you must simultaneously speed up, scan the freeway for an opening, and adjust your speed to fit into the opening. Following these tips can smooth the process.

- **Maintain proper speed.** Always enter the freeway at or near the speed of traffic. Do not stop unless it is absolutely necessary. Stopping on the on-ramp is dangerous because you then must attempt to accelerate into a stream of traffic going much faster than you.
- **Allow space.** To merge safely, allow a four-second gap in traffic—a two-second following distance from the car in front of you and two seconds from the car behind you. A four-second gap means four seconds between when the car in front of you passes the on-ramp and when the car behind you passes it. Turn on your turn signal and adjust your speed to put you in the middle of the gap. As you merge, use your mirror and look over your left shoulder to make sure no traffic is in your blind spot, or moving into the right lane from the left.
- **Play it safe.** In deciding whether to speed up or slow down to get around traffic when merging, remember that freeway traffic has the right of way and should not be expected to slow down to let you in. Be especially careful about merging in front of a large vehicle such as a truck. Large vehicles have a very long stopping distance and cannot stop or slow down quickly if you cut in front of them.

Changing Lanes

Follow the same merging principles when changing lanes. Allow a four-second gap, check your blind spots and your mirrors, and use your turn signal. Remember to turn off your signal after changing lanes or entering the freeway. If you have to cross several lanes, take them one lane at a time. Avoid slowing down or speeding up drastically to change lanes. Plan ahead so you have plenty of time to change lanes.

Exiting the Freeway

Read the road signs to allow plenty of time to get into your exit lane. When exiting, maintain the proper speed—fast enough not to interrupt the flow of traffic and slow enough to exit safely. Use your turn signal for at least five seconds before exiting.

Freeways are fast, efficient and safe, but they take skill and practice to negotiate safely. If you are unnerved by driving in heavy freeway traffic, practice during hours when the traffic is light. You will soon develop the confidence to get on and off the freeway safely.