

Safe following distances

In today's fast-paced world, it's all too easy to get caught up in the rush and overlook the importance of creating space between vehicles on the road. Yet, understanding and practising proper following distances is a fundamental aspect of responsible driving. Whether you're a seasoned driver or a new one, maintaining safe gaps between vehicles can save lives.

Keeping a safe following distance mitigates the risk of vehicle collisions, essential for safe driving. Speed impacts the distance you need to stop safely.

The following contributing factors/deficiencies may have an impact on possible incidents:

- Speed – driving too fast;
- Alertness – not paying attention to traffic ahead; or
- Following/stopping distance – not following the prescribed stopping/following distances when behind other vehicles

Reminder

All drivers are reminded of the importance of the following controls:

- Speed – WTTTC drivers are to always adhere to NSW road rules. Breaking the rules can result in being reported to NSW Police and immediate suspension of employment. Reduce speed to suit vehicle load and drive to the conditions of the road and weather conditions.
- When driving in rain/fog/poor light and in built-up traffic areas, slow down and be alert. Increase stopping/following distance to allow for adverse conditions, traffic volumes and vehicle loads.
- Stopping/Following distance – In NSW it is recommended to have a 3 to 4-second stopping/following time depending on the speed being travelled. Increase stopping/following distance to allow for speed travelled, adverse conditions and vehicle loads.

Actions

You must keep enough distance between you and the vehicle travelling in front so you can, if necessary, stop safely to avoid colliding with the vehicle.

If you're driving a long vehicle (over 7.5m, including towed vehicles), you must drive at least 60m behind other long vehicles, unless you're:

- driving on a multi-lane road
- driving in a built-up area
- overtaking.

You can get a fine and demerit points if you drive too close to another vehicle.

How to keep a safe distance

Road positioning

Road positioning means keeping enough room around your vehicle to avoid hazards. This is also referred to as buffering.

This can mean keeping to the left at the top of a hill or a sharp corner so oncoming vehicles can drive past you safely. Or it can mean not getting too close to parked cars so you can avoid hitting opening doors.

Always check your mirrors before changing your position on the road.

Crash avoidance space

As a driver, you should adjust your speed and position to keep a safe distance from vehicles in front and to the sides of your vehicle. This is called your crash avoidance space.

Many of the crashes that happen each day in NSW could be avoided if drivers kept their crash avoidance space.

To work out the crash avoidance space to the front of your vehicle, you need to consider two key factors – reaction time and response time:

- Reaction time is the time a driver needs to see and understand a situation, decide on a response, and then start to take action. A driver who is fit and alert and not affected by alcohol, drugs or fatigue, needs about 1.5 seconds to react to a hazard. At higher speeds it increases to about 2.5 seconds.
- Response time is the time a driver needs to take action. Most people need at least 1.5 seconds to respond, for example, to brake.

In good driving conditions, most people need a 3-second crash avoidance space (often called the 3-second gap) to react and respond to a situation safely and avoid a crash.

Keep at least 3 seconds' distance between your vehicle and the vehicle in front of you



Keep at least 3 seconds' distance between your vehicle and the vehicle in front of you

You should increase your crash avoidance space to 4 or more seconds when driving in poor conditions, such as on unsealed (dirt or gravel), icy or wet roads, or at night.

You can help other vehicles, such as trucks and buses, to keep their crash avoidance space by not cutting in front of them.

Working out your crash avoidance space

To calculate your crash avoidance space when driving:

1. Select an object or mark on the left-hand-side of the road, for example, a power pole, tree or sign.
2. As the rear of the vehicle in front of you passes this object, count 3 seconds ('1 thousand and 1, 2 thousand and 2, 3 thousand and 3').
3. If your vehicle passes the object after you've finished counting, this is enough crash avoidance space.

If your vehicle passes the object before you finish counting, you're following too closely. Slow down, and repeat the count until there's a 3-second gap between you and the vehicle in front.

Driving speed and crash avoidance space

The 3-second gap changes depending on your speed. The faster you're going, and in wet weather the longer it takes to stop and avoid a crash. The combined effects of reaction and braking times in dry conditions is illustrated in the table below.

Most drivers underestimate the distance needed to stop their vehicle. When you drive just 5km/h over the speed limit, you need much further to stop, even if you brake hard.

If there's potential for another vehicle or hazard to enter your crash avoidance space, slow down to create a buffer, and prepare to stop if necessary. It's important to keep your crash avoidance space for all potentially hazardous situations, including blind corners and crests.

Be careful and slow down if there's a chance something might enter your crash avoidance space, such as another vehicle turning from a side street

Braking technique

Correct braking is done in 2 stages:

1. Put light pressure on the brake pedal and pause (set up the brakes).
2. Progressively apply the necessary braking pressure (squeeze).

Two-stage braking makes braking more effective, reduces the chance of skidding and gives you better control. Harsh or excessive braking pressure may cause skidding and a loss of control, particularly on wet or gravel roads.

Scanning

Scanning is essential for safe driving. Scanning is keeping your eyes moving, checking in one area for a couple of seconds and then moving your eye to another area.

When scanning look:

- in the distance
- at the road surface
- to your left and right
- regularly at your mirrors and instruments.

By Sunette Opperman, WHS Manager, May 2023