

# Driving In The Dark

As we enter into the winter and days get shorter we are more likely to be driving at dusk or at night. Only one third of all driving is done after dark, but two thirds of all fatal auto accidents happen in the dark.

As a driver, what particular problems do you face when darkness falls?

The most obvious is limited vision. Out on the highway, with just your headlights to light the way, you are boxed into a visual area that extends only about 300 feet ahead of you. You depend on your headlights and reflected light to see.

When an object appears that does not have a light or does not reflect yours, you can be in for trouble. Studies have demonstrated that drivers see unexpected objects only half as far away as objects they expect to see.

The fact that your vision is limited to about 300 feet means that if you are traveling faster than 55 miles an hour in the dark, you can not possibly stop in time to avoid an object, even if you see it. Forty five miles an hour is the maximum speed for stopping within 300 feet on wet pavement. If the road is icy, 25 miles an hour is the fastest you can afford to go in order to stop in time.

Other studies demonstrate that the faster you are moving at night, the shorter the distance you can see ahead. Human eyes can not keep up with the changing data it is subjected to at speed. Your eyes are constantly adjusting to rapidly changing distances and conditions giving you a more limited distance you can see at higher speeds. For example a driver traveling 20 miles per hour at night can see and identify objects 80 feet further away than a driver traveling 60 miles per hour!

Always lower your headlights when an oncoming vehicle is about 1,000 feet away. The driver of the approaching vehicle may be blinded by your lights, and sideswipe you. If the other driver does not lower their lights, do not put your bright on "to teach him a lesson". This foolish practice only puts yourself and the other drivers on the road in jeopardy. It is also always possible that it is because of a mechanical failure, and not lack of courtesy that keeps the other driver from lowering their lights.

Even when the approaching driver lowers their lights, keep looking at the right side of the road, so you are not blinded. Even lowered headlights can cause glare on parts of the road. Of course, while looking at the right side of the road, don't loose track of where the other vehicles on the road!

Because vision is so tricky at night, it is essential that you keep your windshield as spotless as possible. Distances are very hard to judge - what may look, at a distance, like something small can suddenly loom up as a dangerous obstacle in the road. Even a light film of dirt can reduce your visibility as much as 40 percent without you even being aware of it.

Take curves a lot slower at night. As your go through turns your headlights point straight ahead of you (shining off the road) leaving you with much less than the usual 300 feet of vision. Depending on how sharp the curve is, your view of the road ahead can be cut to 100 feet or less.

Distances are harder to judge when it is dark. Objects that in daylight help you to relate to other objects can't always be seen. Don't use small objects such as taillights and far-away signs or posts to try to figure out how far you are from another vehicle. Small objects will change very little in size as you approach from a distance, and thus using them for a reference can be very deceiving.

Take extra care during the half light of dawn and dusk. During dawn and dusk, neither headlights nor daylight may be enough to give you a clear view. Shadows make things look bigger and give a false idea how fast something may be moving. The glare of the rising or setting sun may blind you or the drivers of other vehicles, so always take extra care when you are driving into or away from the sun.