



## Defensive Driving

In 2020, there was an accident on Texas roads every one minute and seven seconds (TXDOT). This statistic has held true for the past decade. In fact, in some years, accident frequencies have been under one minute. You could attribute this to how many miles of road are in Texas, but we also have to account for how many miles our employees drive every day and how much that adds up in a year. Accident frequency can be looked at as a “Law of Averages” type of statistic. If you have not experienced a motor vehicle accident, it is only a matter of time before one will happen. For this reason, it is important that we emphasize the importance of defensive driving with our employees. In this article, we will discuss three aspects of defensive driving that will help employees avoid accidents.

Driving is a skill that has become a habit. It is a skill because we learned how to do it. Over time, though, it has turned into a habit for many of us because often times our subconscious takes over. Think of how many times you have been driving and wondered what you had passed for the last five minutes.

Habit. That is an interesting word for this article. You can have good habits, but you can also have bad habits. What kind of habits do you have when you drive? Let’s focus on the bad habits. Following too closely, getting distracted while driving, speeding, driving aggressively, and not paying attention to what is going on down the road are a few examples. Most of the time when we display these habits behind the wheel, nothing bad happens. This “tells” us that it is okay to do it again the next time we drive. Why do you think so many people text and drive? It is because they have done it before, and nothing happened. This is how bad habits are established. What we want to do is start creating good habits. If you are already doing what we discuss below, then you are ahead of the curve.

### **Limit Your Distractions**

According to TXDOT, there were 80,431 crashes in 2020 due to distraction. There are many distractions when we drive. Cell phones, the radio, eating, drinking, and passengers just to name a few. As a defensive driving best practice, it is always best to avoid these, but it is a hard task. Most of our members have a No Cell Phone Use policy but they are nearly impossible to track. It comes down to individuals resisting the urge.

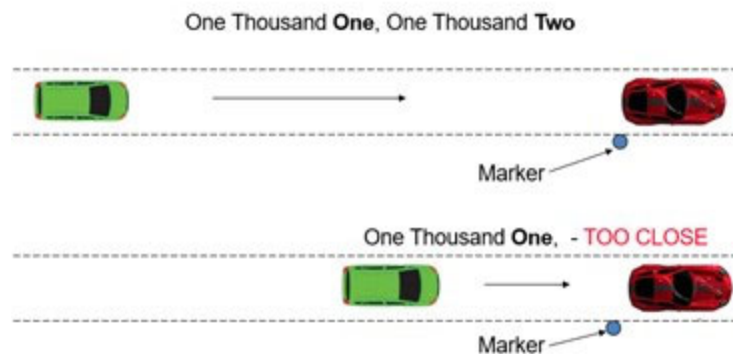
- **Put the cell phone away** – Put it in the console, the back seat, laptop bag, or purse. Do not place it somewhere you can easily reach and look at it. Learn the settings on your phone to let others know you are not receiving notifications while driving.
- **Limit your conversations** – Getting drawn into long conversations can take our mind off the road, and at times, our eyes as well. This does not mean you cannot talk, just keep conversations short and avoid looking over to who you are talking to.
- **You decide where your passengers sit** – This applies mostly to van drivers because there are not many options in a car. You want to place passengers in a seat that will

not cause a distraction. Also, you want to keep the seat behind the driver empty. This applies to all vehicles, where applicable.

- **Avoid eating and drinking** – We all must eat and there are times when we have to get to our next appointment. Allow yourself time to eat. You can go through the drive through but park for five to ten minutes for yourself. Limit drinks to when you are stopped.

### **Have a Safe Following Distance**

Rear-ending accidents are an accident type that has been growing in frequency over the years. Most of the time, this is because a driver is following too closely. As a best practice, it is recommended to observe a following distance of two seconds for cars and three seconds for vans. You can accomplish this by counting “one thousand one, one thousand two” when the car in front of you passes a stationary object, a mile marker, street sign, tree, or even a line in the asphalt. This will work at any speed. The faster you go, the more distance between you and the car in front of you. Of course, you will want to increase your following distance when road conditions worsen. Another time to increase your following distance would be when you are behind a high-profile vehicle; 18-wheeler, moving truck, an RV, or lifted truck to name a few. The reason for this is you cannot see beyond these types of vehicles with a two or three second following distance. Here is an illustration of a safe and unsafe following distance.



### **Anticipate What is Coming Up Ahead**

The last piece of defensive driving we want to discuss is anticipation. Most drivers only pay attention to the car directly in front of them. By doing this, drivers only react when the driver in front of them reacts. However, if they took the time to look ahead, they could identify situations that need them to start slowing down or move over:

- Traffic signal up ahead
- Slowing traffic
- Debris in the road
- Construction zones
- A lane ending up ahead
- A vehicle or two on the entrance ramp
- A car about to change lanes when we are in their blind spot

Now pair these conditions with either following too closely or being distracted and the potential for an accident increases significantly. As a best practice, you want to scan the road ahead every few seconds and watch for the things listed above. A great indication is an abundance of brake lights up ahead. However, the car changing lanes may not always use their blinker so if we anticipate that they might move over, we are already preparing ourselves to react by identifying what we should do.

When we drive, we tend to fall back to the habits we used the day before and the day before that and so on. We come by it honestly. We are all creatures of habit. When it comes to defensive driving, we want to develop new habits that will get us to our destination safely. The best practices discussed here is a great start in that process. Over time, we will develop these safe driving habits without even realizing it.

The Loss Control staff has defensive driving training material, and we would be glad to present this class in person or via webinar for your organization. We can also assist with written driving policies.