

# What to Do When...

## Your Vehicle Breaks Down

*\* The following pages highlight some of the issues covered in AAA's *What to Do When Your Vehicle Breaks Down*, a booklet designed to promote personal safety in the event of an automotive emergency. Media may request a faxed copy of the guide via email at [news@national.aaa.com](mailto:news@national.aaa.com).*

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### Be Smart, Be Cautious, Be Safe

You can do many things to be a safe driver. But it is almost inevitable that at some point you'll have trouble with your vehicle. Each year, millions of motorists encounter such difficulties. How well you deal with vehicle trouble can have a direct bearing on your personal safety.

If you encounter someone who needs assistance, inquire if they need help. If you experience vehicle trouble, know what to do.

Vehicle operating problems are always an inconvenience, and sometimes they can even put you in harm's way. If your vehicle breaks down, your first consideration should be safety for yourself and any passengers. There's no way to absolutely guarantee personal safety. But knowing what to do in such a situation is something you can prepare for in advance, not wait to figure out when you're experiencing the problem.

### Don't Wait. Anticipate.

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**G**ood planning leads to safer journeys.

How you fare when your vehicle fails is often a matter of how you respond to any given situation. The decisions you make are important and have good and bad consequences. You should anticipate your actions and recognize their impact on the outcome.

Most problems are preventable. So are bad judgment calls. Safety should always be a key part of the decision-making process, regardless of where your travels take you.

To arrive safely at your destination, you need to ensure your vehicle can go the distance. You also need to be mentally and physically prepared to meet any challenges along the way.

Prevention and preparation are the basic ingredients for a great driving experience. You can enhance that experience and your personal safety when you include awareness and planning.

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Since your surroundings, traffic patterns and vehicle hazards all vary, it's impossible to establish rigid rules for all conditions. That's why it's important for you to continually monitor and evaluate your own situation and become familiar with some general suggestions and guidelines.

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**Pull off the road.** On most roads, you should exit onto the far right shoulder, as far off the road as possible while remaining on level ground. If you are driving on an interstate or multiple-lane highway with



medians, you may consider the left shoulder, again pulling as far away from traffic as possible. Remain with your vehicle. Safety experts agree that under most circumstances if you are able to pull away from traffic, it is safest to remain in your vehicle until a law enforcement officer or towing operator arrives.

If you do not have a cell phone, consider whether a nearby location has a pay phone. It's a good idea to carry extra coins or a prepaid long distance phone card just for emergencies.

- Always be mindful of your surroundings. At night, carry a flashlight.
- If there is no telephone available within a safe walking distance, try to get the attention of other drivers. Seek out law enforcement officers if possible.
- If a stranger offers to take you to a phone, decline the offer. Instead, ask the person to make the call for you.
- In some circumstances when there is no other alternative, you may need to rely on the help of a stranger. Should this be your only alternative to get help, ask for identification including name, phone number and address before accepting assistance. Write this information down and leave it with another person, or in the vehicle, explaining where you are going when you expect to return and what you hope to accomplish.
- If you choose to exit the vehicle, do so safely and well away from oncoming traffic and your vehicle. If possible, you and any passengers should exit through the side of the vehicle facing away from the road. In most cases, the passenger side of the vehicle allows for greater distance from oncoming traffic and may be safer than exiting via driver-side doors.
- If you determine help is within walking distance, think about whether it's safe to leave your vehicle or passengers for a short period of time. Assess traffic conditions and ensure your contemplated route is safe for pedestrians. If you leave your vehicle, place a note on the dashboard listing where you are going for help and the time you left.
- If you choose to stay inside your vehicle where you're comfortable, safe and secure, keep the windows almost closed and the doors locked. It's very dangerous to lower your windows or open your vehicle doors to strangers. If a stranger does stop to offer help, ask the person to call for emergency road service.
- If you are threatened or harassed while waiting in your car, honk the horn repeatedly and flash the lights to attract attention.
- Don't leave the engine on for extended periods to heat or cool the vehicle. You could put yourself and any passengers at risk of carbon monoxide poisoning.

**What if you CANNOT pull off the road?** If your vehicle loses power and is inoperable, switch on safety/emergency flashers. Do not risk personal injury by attempting to push it to a safe location. If you cannot get your vehicle to a location away from traffic or if you are uncertain about your safety and think your vehicle may be struck from behind, do not stay in your vehicle. Proceed carefully and watch for oncoming traffic, especially at night or in bad weather when visibility is limited.

- Never stand behind or directly in front of your vehicle. Other roadway users may have trouble seeing you, and you could be struck by an oncoming vehicle.
- Turn on the emergency flashers, especially at night or during inclement weather.
- Place flares or warning triangles to direct oncoming traffic away from your vehicle. If you are experiencing a gas leak or smell gas fumes, do not ignite flares or use anything with a flame.
- Extinguish any lit cigarettes. As a rule of thumb, place the first flare or triangle 10 feet directly behind the side of the vehicle closest to the road. Place the second device 100 feet directly behind the vehicle lined up with the middle of the bumper. Position the third device behind the vehicle's right side — 100 feet if on an undivided highway, 300 feet if on a divided highway.
- Alert other motorists. Make sure your vehicle is visible to other motorists. Remember they're traveling at a high rate of speed and must be able to see your vehicle from a great distance to stop or move to another lane.
- Raise your vehicle's hood and tie a brightly colored handkerchief or scarf to the antenna or door handle. You also can hold the handkerchief or scarf in place by closing a window on it.

- Communicate your situation. Once you and any passengers are in a safe location, you can notify others of your vehicle breakdown. Make note of your surroundings and landmarks, buildings or road signs.
- If you have a cellular phone, immediately use it to call for help. Make the call from inside your vehicle if you are safely out of traffic. Otherwise, do so outside your vehicle a safe distance from the vehicle and roadway.

*AAA's What to Do When Your Vehicle Breaks Down covers a variety of other issues, including personal preparedness, problem prevention, what to expect from emergency road service, and how to handle vehicle repair.*