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Safe travels: Disaster preparedness on the road



Taking steps to stay safe while driving is nothing new. We buckle our seat belts, adjust the rearview mirror and put away our phones. So, why not take a few more steps to protect yourself in case you encounter a disaster while on the road? A little knowledge and preparation can go miles in keeping you safe.

Road rules

Learning more about the kind of disasters that can happen in your community is always a good first step. In preparing to stay safe while on the road, it's especially important to learn about disasters that can happen with little warning and are likely to catch you off guard. Such disasters can include tornadoes, flash floods, landslides and earthquakes. It's also a good idea to learn about your community's evacuation routes and designated shelters. In fact, a good tip is to keep a list of designated shelters in your car as well as maps that clearly note safe evacuation routes.

Here's a few specific tips for staying safe if you find yourself behind the wheel when a disaster hits.

- **Tornadoes:** Tornadoes can hit with very little warning. If you're in a car, make sure your seat belt is fastened and drive to the nearest shelter. If you see flying debris, pull over, park and lower your head below window level. Do not park under a bridge or overpass.
- **Floods:** Six inches of water can reach the bottom of most passenger cars and can cause you to lose control or your car to stall. Two feet of fast-moving water can carry away most vehicles, including trucks and SUVs. If floodwaters start to rise around your car, do not hesitate to leave your vehicle and walk to higher ground. Do not attempt to drive in flooded areas.
- **Landslides:** A landslide is a mass of rock, earth and other debris moving down a slope. When driving in an area prone to landslides, be on the alert for cracked pavement, fallen rocks and other signs of a landslide. If you see a landslide happening, drive out of its path immediately.



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■ **Earthquakes:** If you're in a car when an earthquake hits, drive out of traffic and park; avoid parking under bridges or overpasses. Do your best to park out of range of trees, utility posts and other falling hazards.

■ **Wildfires:** Though it's dangerous and should only be done in an emergency, you can survive a wildfire by staying in your car. Roll up your windows, close the air vents and drive very slowly with the headlights on. Do not attempt to drive through heavy smoke. If you have to stop, park away from trees and brush, leave the headlights on, turn off your ignition, get on the floor of your car and cover yourself with a blanket until the main fire passes.



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■ **Blizzards:** If you find yourself trapped in your car in a blizzard, pull off the

road, turn on the hazard lights and, if you're able, hang a distress flag or piece of cloth from the car's antennae or window. Run the heater and car engine about 10 minutes each hour to stay warm. When the engine is on, crack the window very slightly to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning. Do not attempt to leave your car and go on foot unless you absolutely know where you can take shelter.

If you resume driving after a disaster, be careful to avoid downed power lines, cracks in the road and any other road hazards. Remember: It may be difficult to abandon your car, but it's important that you don't hesitate if the situation calls for it.



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Stockpiles on the go



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There are a few emergency items you should have in your car at all times. Your vehicle's emergency kit should include jumper cables, up-to-date maps, emergency flares, a first aid kit, a flashlight, extra blankets, a spare tire, batteries, a battery-operated radio, a manual can opener and a cellphone charger. It's also important that you have bottled water and non-perishable foods.

You can purchase specially packaged food and water that will last for long periods of time in your car. However, you can also prepare a portable kit of food and water to store in your home; just make sure it's easily accessible so you can grab it in a hurry in case of evacuation. Make sure every car in your household, including your teenage son's or daughter's car, is prepared for an emergency. Depending on where you live, you might add special items as well, such as an ice scraper or a bag of sand to get traction in the snow.

If you know a disaster is headed your way, such as a hurricane, keep a full tank of gas in the car so you'll be ready to go. And have some cash on hand, in case ATMs or credit card machines are down.

Finally, don't forget about your vehicle's maintenance — it can be critical if you encounter disaster or heavy weather. For example, check the tire pressure, make sure your windshield wipers work well, and inspect the antifreeze and coolant levels.



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