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DRIVING AT NIGHT

Many drivers, particularly those new to the road, may not yet have experienced driving at night. This can be simply due to a daily routine whereby there's no need to drive at night, and for new drivers' particularly who may have taken their driving lessons predominantly in the spring or summer time. Unsurprisingly, the most significant difference when driving at night is that your general vision is greatly reduced, therefore it can be far more difficult to see other road users - particularly those road users that are naturally more difficult to see because of their smaller physical size such as cyclists (and bike riders), motorcyclists and pedestrians. It's worth noting that motorcycles generally use only a single headlight which may be very dimly lit, and also that many cyclists, and particularly bike riders, fail to use any form of illumination - not even in the form of reflective clothing.

Your visibility to others is also greatly reduced.

Because of the reduced lighting it can be difficult to correctly judge speed, distance, shape and depth and of course colours; all of this alongside the affect it has on your peripheral vision (the part of your vision that occurs outside the very centre of your gaze).

Below are just some of the tips you should aim to take on board when driving at night:

Tip #1

The most basic advice would be to avoid driving at night. This, of course, is not always possible or for that matter realistic. If you do need to drive at night you should plan your journey in advance and ideally aim to be well rested before it begins. It's also important for you to ensure that your vehicle is correctly maintained. Clean all of the vehicles' lights - all lights should be fully functional by law; dirt and grime on the headlights will reduce the spread and intensity of the light beam making it more difficult for you to see, as well as making you less visible to others. It's also important to avoid 'overdriving' your headlights. This means you should avoid driving at a speed whereby you would be unable to stop inside the illuminated area created by the spread of your headlights (headlights generally provide approximately 30 metres of visibility when dipped, and somewhere on the region of 100 metres when on full beam). Failure to do so will make you vulnerable as you are essentially creating a blind area in front of your vehicle.

*You can also use your interior mirror's 'Anti-Dazzle' setting / feature to deflect the glare from the lights of the vehicle behind you.

In addition to cleaning the headlights, you should also ensure that the vehicles' windows (and mirrors for that matter!) are free from dirt and grime in order to help reduce dazzle, and allow as much of the available light as possible to be seen from inside the vehicle.

It's also advisable to ensure that the windscreen washer reservoir is filled with suitable fluid.

Tip #2

Depending upon the distance and expected journey time involved, you should also plan rest breaks on route every one-and-a-half to two hours where possible. Taking the opportunity to eat light snacks and possibly even take in some fresh air and exercise.

If your journey is particularly long, and if necessary, pre-book your overnight stops in advance.

Tip #3

If you've been driving in a well lit area, or you have recently left a well-lit building, it can take a while for your eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness. Allow time for your eyes to adjust where possible and take extra care.

Tip #4

It's been proven that driver tiredness and fatigue is the cause of a large number of fatalities on UK roads at night time - even though there is generally less traffic. Drowsiness seriously affects concentration and in turn slows down reaction times. Try to avoid having to drive at night following a hard day at work as this can onset fatigue very quickly, and try to avoid driving during the hours when you are normally sleeping; your body's natural 'clock' will begin to influence your behaviour.

Tip #5

Your eyesight can deteriorate gradually without you really realising it - regardless of your age. During daylight hours this deterioration may not be obvious, however it may be noticeable when driving at night as your eyes are limited to the amount of light available.

It's thought that a driver aged 50 may actually need twice as much light to enable them to see as well as a driver half their age. It is advisable to have your eyesight checked annually and also if you notice any deterioration on a day-to-day basis.

Tip #6

Reduce your speed and in turn increase the separating distance between yourself and the vehicle in front - it's important to make such adjustments to your driving style due to the reduced visibility.

Tip #7

This one sounds blatantly obvious, but don't drink and drive. Of course, we all know that alcohol severely impairs your ability to drive, but alcohol also acts as a depressant - even one small drink can induce severe fatigue.

Furthermore, be aware that if you're traveling at the weekend, there is a heightened potential for other road users to be driving under the influence of alcohol. Alcohol is a major factor involved in fatal vehicle crashes generally, but there are more fatal crashes taking place at the weekend than there are at any other given time during the week.

Tip #8

Should you be unfortunate enough to encounter vehicle issues, you should aim to pull as far off the road as possible. It's important that you warn other road users of your presence as soon as possible by turning both the hazard warning lights and interior lights on. You should also set up reflective warning triangles near your vehicle and also at around 300 feet behind it (not to be used on motorways). You should also get all passengers out of the vehicle and make sure that you and your passengers stay off and away from the carriageway.

*Please be aware that not all vehicles come equipped with these warning triangles from the manufacturer. If your vehicle is one of these, it is certainly worth investing in them from your local dealership, or even your local motor factor.

So there you have it!

A fairly comprehensive collection of tips (I've possibly overlooked one or two!?) which will assist you in gaining the confidence to drive at night.

Best wishes and 'Safe Driving for Life'

Chris Chambers DSA ADI

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