

Defensive Walking: Pedestrian Safety for Adults

Many people spend years practicing defensive driving, anticipating what the other driver might do. Walking also requires thinking ahead about what a driver might do. While the safest walking conditions may require changes to the physical environment – like sidewalks and traffic signals - or help from law enforcement in slowing speeding traffic, there are things that pedestrians can do to make themselves as safe as possible. Defensive walking is all about identifying situations that carry higher risks of being hit by a car and taking steps to control these situations as much as possible.

Crossing

- **Intersections**

Although intersections are where pedestrians should cross, intersections are often where you need to look in the most directions for vehicles.

What should a pedestrian do? Anticipate that a driver might run a red light. Look around before stepping into the road even when a light turns green or the walk signal appears. Check the direction that cars may be coming and make sure approaching drivers see you.

- **Stepping off the curb**

The first half of the crossing has its own risks. This is when a pedestrian may be the most difficult for a driver to see or expect and there is also less time for the pedestrian to react.

What should a pedestrian do? Check for cars before stepping out and make sure drivers see you.

- **Visual screens**

When there's more than one lane of traffic in the same direction, one car that stops can act as a "visual screen," so that the driver in the next lane does not see the pedestrian.

What should a pedestrian do? While crossing, as you come to the end of the first car, stop and look to see if another car is approaching. If so, can that driver see you? Does that driver have enough time to stop for you? If not, then allow the vehicle to pass before continuing.

- **Crossing time at traffic signals**

The walk signal might not provide enough time to comfortably cross the street.

What should a pedestrian do? If you've not started crossing and the "Don't Walk" signal is flashing, then wait until the next walk signal begins. If you're crossing and the signal starts to flash "Don't Walk," keep crossing the street. If the signal does not provide enough time to cross safely, the city transportation department needs to know. Give them a call.

Backing vehicles

There are three main situations in which pedestrians might encounter backing cars: 1) when a walkway crosses a driveway, 2) when crossing between parked cars and 3) in a parking lot. When backing up, a driver may not be able to see directly behind, or may not look for pedestrians. Likewise, pedestrians may be looking for moving cars, not parked cars about to move. Hybrid cars are particularly tricky because they have very quiet engines so there's not the typical engine noise that pedestrians expect.

What should a pedestrian do? When possible, pick a route that doesn't require walking behind cars. Look for brake lights and listen for engine noise and other cues that a car is about to move. Notice large parked vehicles that may block the view of smaller vehicles as they back up and look for vehicles backing out of driveways.

Being seen

When pedestrians are hit by vehicles, the drivers often say that they did not see them. This may be because the drivers are paying attention to something besides driving or it's dusk and difficult to see, or another reason. No matter what the case, it's worth the extra effort to make sure that drivers see you.

What should a pedestrian do? Make eye contact with the approaching driver. Nod or wave if appropriate. That is the surest way to make sure you have the driver's attention. Dress to be visible by wearing light, bright clothes with retro-reflective markings and carry a flashlight or other lighting when walking at twilight and dark.

Take a moment to check again

People make mistakes, and driver mistakes can be costly to people walking. Just because the light says it's your turn to cross does not mean that cars will yield. Sometimes situations make it hard for drivers to see, like when they are backing up or it's dark outside. Defensive walking means counting on yourself as the final judge of what's happening. Take a moment to make eye contact with a driver or wait until a car passes before continuing on your way.



Here, the pedestrian and the driver of the left-turning vehicle both have traffic signals telling them it is their turn.

Today, many cities and communities understand the value of walkable neighborhoods and much is being done to improve the walking environment. However, by staying alert and following these precautions, pedestrians can have more control of their safety wherever they walk.