

Appraiser Blog

Navigating the Hazards of Nighttime Driving



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As we "fall back" to shorter days, the challenges of nighttime driving become more pronounced. Shorter days, fatigue, compromised night vision, rush hour, and impaired drivers are some of the risks we encounter when driving after dark. Fatal crashes peak on Saturday nights, according to the NSC analysis of NHTSA data, making weekend driving even more perilous.

When Daylight Saving Time ends (in 2023, on Sunday, Nov. 5, at 2 a.m.), many people find themselves driving in the dark for longer periods. Night driving poses unique challenges, including compromised depth perception, color recognition, and peripheral vision. The glare from oncoming headlights can temporarily blind a driver, exacerbating the risks.

Night driving is dangerous because even with high-beam headlights, visibility is limited to about 500 feet (250 feet for normal headlights), leaving less time to react to road obstacles, especially at higher speeds.



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Here's What You Can Do to Combat Darkness:

- Ensure your headlights are aimed correctly and clean.
- Dim your dashboard.
- Avoid looking directly at oncoming lights.
- If you wear glasses, opt for anti-reflective coatings.
- Keep your windshield streak-free.
- Reduce your speed to account for limited visibility and increased stopping distances.

Enhancing nighttime visibility is crucial for highway safety, as approximately half of traffic fatalities occur in the dark, at dawn, or dusk. Better headlights can lead to fewer nighttime accidents.

Not all headlights perform equally well, and IIHS evaluations have shown significant variations in on-road illumination provided by different headlights.

Compromised Night Vision

Night vision deteriorates as we age, with older drivers requiring more light to see effectively. Drivers aged 60 and older may face additional challenges due to cataracts and degenerative eye diseases. The American Optometric Association recommends that older drivers:

- Have annual vision exams.
- Reduce their driving speed.
- Consider taking a refresher driving course.
- Minimize distractions while driving.
- Consult with their doctors regarding prescription drug side effects.
- Limit driving to daytime hours if necessary.

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Vehicles with good ratings for visibility in the IIHS headlight test have fewer nighttime single-vehicle and pedestrian crashes. Acceptable and marginal headlights are also associated with reduced crash rates.

Fatigue

Drowsy driving poses a significant risk, with an estimated 100,000 police-reported crashes attributed to driver fatigue. Factors such as shift work, inadequate sleep, long hours, and sleep disorders contribute to this problem. The National Sleep Foundation recommends:

- Have a good night's sleep.
- Avoid driving if you've been awake for 16 hours or more.
- Take regular breaks to rest.
- Pull over and take a nap if you become drowsy.
- Travel during your usual awake hours.

Headlamp Type

Headlight technology has evolved over the years, from halogen bulbs to high-intensity discharge (HID) lamps and, more recently, LED headlamps. IIHS headlight ratings are technology-neutral, focusing on performance metrics rather than specific technologies.

Technology

Some vehicles now offer curve-adaptive headlights, which pivot based on steering wheel movement and vehicle speed to improve visibility on curvy, dark roads. High-beam assist automatically switches between high and low beams based on the presence of other vehicles. Research suggests that using high beams when appropriate improves obstacle detection.

Another available feature is adaptive driving beams, which continuously adjust the high-beam pattern to avoid glare for other drivers. This technology has been associated with reduced nighttime crashes.

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Rush Hour

Evening rush hour can be perilous due to crowded roads and impatient drivers. During winter, darkness further compounds the danger. To stay safe during rush hour:

- Drive patiently and reduce your speed.
- Stay in your lane and watch for lane changes by other drivers.
- Remain alert, even on familiar routes.
- Consult a map for unfamiliar areas and memorize your route.
- Drinking, eating, and using your phone are dangerous distractions: avoid them as much as possible.

Impaired Drivers

Alcohol and drug impairment contribute to approximately one-third of traffic fatalities, with nighttime driving, especially between midnight and 3 a.m. on weekends, posing a heightened risk. It's crucial to stay alert and avoid driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Key Points

Nighttime driving presents unique challenges, and taking precautions is essential. By addressing issues such as compromised night vision, fatigue, headlight performance, and the presence of impaired drivers, we can collectively contribute to reducing nighttime traffic fatalities and making the roads safer for everyone.

For more tips on how to be safe on the road, take a look at this other article: [Muscle Cars and Driver Fatality Statistics](#)