What to Do When Your Vehicle Breaks Down
Good 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.

Prepare your vehicle. It’s important to maintain your vehicle. Otherwise, you could experience an operating failure and unnecessary frustration. Worse yet, a disabled vehicle could lead to a crash with injuries.

• Get in the habit of conducting periodic safety checks to ensure your vehicle is in good operating condition.
• AAA-approved repair shops offer members free safety inspections when other work is performed on their vehicle.
• A safety check includes tires, lights, belts, hoses, fluids and windshield wipers.
• Read your owner’s manual to clearly understand which dash lights or signals indicate your vehicle is not operating properly and what to do.

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.
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.

**Make personal safety an integral part of your driving experience.**

**Prepare yourself for the journey.** Just because your vehicle is in good working order doesn't mean you are ready to go. Whether you're headed across town or across the country, make certain you are rested and alert.

- Plan your route before you depart. Know where you are going. Tell another person about your plans. Agree to telephone when you arrive. When in doubt, consult a map or obtain a trip routing from a professional travel counselor.
- Be aware of any adverse weather conditions that may impair safe passage.
- Be alert to construction areas or other hazards between you and your destination.
- Realize that traffic patterns vary depending on the time of day, especially in school zones or near shopping centers, entertainment complexes and major places of employment.
- Minimize distractions. Limit conversations with passengers. Keep music volume moderate, and do not use a cell phone while driving.
- Be mindful that emergency vehicles may require the right-of-way at any time.
- Do not drive while fatigued, under emotional stress or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- Always buckle up and ensure any passengers, particularly infants and small children, are properly secured.

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**Note your vehicle's location.** If you encounter a problem while driving, make sure you are aware of your surroundings and general location. Know where you are in relation to a major exit or cross street. Look for well-lighted areas. Notice landmarks such as service stations, restaurants, shopping centers or business complexes. If you are on an interstate highway, note the mile marker, last exit number, nearest emergency call box or rest area. You may need this information in summoning assistance.

**Assess your vehicle's operating problem.** While driving, be aware of warning signs such as steering problems or steam or smoke coming from under the hood. Also listen for any unusual noises.

If it's a flat tire, the first rule is not to panic. Signal, slow down gradually and carefully pull off the road on to the shoulder, avoiding any sudden maneuvers.

If you run out of gas or your engine stops, switch on emergency/safety flashers, carefully steer your vehicle out of traffic and let its momentum get you off the road to a safe place. Avoid applying the brakes until necessary.
3 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.

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.

4 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.

- Turn on the emergency flashers, especially at night or during inclement weather.
- 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.
- 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.

5 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.

6 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.
You also should:

- Describe as thoroughly as possible the nature of the problem.
- Explain if your vehicle requires special towing equipment or pre-transport preparation. For example, failure to properly disengage automatic air ride or drive train devices may result in vehicle damage. Check your owner's manual for specific instructions.
- Make certain the service provider is aware of any unusual circumstances that may require special towing or transport considerations such as unusual vehicle, large number of passengers, infants, medical needs, etc.
- Under no circumstances will you be able to ride in your disabled vehicle while it is being transported.
- Most motor clubs expect the tow truck driver to offer transportation to the towing destination. Unless you are able to arrange for a ride from the breakdown site with a trusted family member or friend, it is best to ride with the tow truck driver rather than rely on assistance from a stranger. Your motor club may be able to arrange for alternative or additional transportation needs such as a taxi or rental vehicle.
- Find out the towing distance to the service garage and the charge for that towing before your vehicle is moved.
- Make sure fees and charges are disclosed. A reputable firm usually will provide a written estimate, and you should request one when the service truck arrives.

What to expect from emergency road service. Emergency road service operators usually can provide gasoline, attempt to change a tire or boost a battery. If the breakdown is due to more severe mechanical or electrical problems, the vehicle will need to be towed to a service center.

What to tell the emergency road service operator or repair garage. Have the following information ready when you call AAA or other service providers. It may be helpful to write it down. The more accurate and thorough you are, the easier it will be for the service provider to assist you.
- The phone number and area code where you can be reached.
- Your location — exact address or nearest intersection or exit number.
- A description of your vehicle — color, make, model and year.
- License plate number.
- Your AAA membership number or insurance information, if applicable.

Determine how long you have to wait. Your service provider should be able to give you an estimate and time of arrival. Depending on the circumstances, it could take as few as 30 minutes or as long as several hours.
- If you are in a remote area or the breakdown occurs late at night on a weekend, be prepared for a longer wait.
- The same goes for inclement weather. When demand for assistance is high, allocation of service vehicles is generally on a first-come, first-served basis.
Properly maintained vehicles seldom become disabled. If they do, certain equipment is helpful. The most important safety equipment are a fully charged cellular telephone and emergency road service coverage. It’s also wise to keep the following items in your vehicle:

- Pencil and notebook.
- Extra medication for emergencies.
- Vehicle operating manual.
- Emergency service information.
- Flashlight with extra batteries.
- Drinking water.
- Jumper cables.
- Flares, warning triangles or reflectors.
- Signal flag, retro-reflective vest or scarf.
- Windshield-washer fluid and wiping cloth.
- Coolant.
- Tire pressure gauge.
- Ice scraper, snow brush and snow shovel, if climate demands.
- Kitty litter is a good substitute for sand when you’re trapped in snow.
- Jack with flat board for soft surfaces.
- Lug wrench for changing a flat tire.
- Screwdriver, pliers, duct tape and adjustable wrench.
- Umbrella.
- Extra fuses.
- Fire extinguisher.
- Heavy gloves and a blanket.
- First-aid kit.
- Preserved food and extra water if traveling in remote areas.

If you expect a long delay or the weather is inclement, have your service provider notify the highway patrol or local law enforcement office to send a vehicle to assist with traffic. Law enforcement can also help move passengers to a safe area if circumstances are life-threatening.

If the estimated wait time is exceeded, contact your motor club again to check status.

What to do when help arrives.
Reputable firms have trained personnel who understand what to do in most situations. It’s important to remain calm and cooperative.

- Ensure a reliable firm is dispatched to service your vehicle. Your garage or tow firm will disclose the name of the company or driver to you at the time you call for or confirm the service.
- Ensure the vehicle and driver that offers to provide assistance are the same as you requested.
- Do not attempt to help the service representative unless he or she asks for assistance.

Know your rights and responsibilities. It’s your responsibility to understand what services your emergency road service or insurance policy will cover.

- Some policies allow for direct billing by authorized towing services with minimal or no charge to you. Others require you to request reimbursement after paying the full cost of towing.
- If you’re not a AAA member, you may be required to pay the entire cost of towing, either with cash or a credit card. Checks are seldom accepted.
- Always get a receipt. Use it to request reimbursement from your towing service or insurance carrier. You may also need it if there are disputed charges. It’s wise to use a credit card for additional protection.
- It’s your responsibility to pay for repairs made to your vehicle.

Some road service plans only cover specific vehicles. AAA covers the member regardless of the vehicle driven, even if the member is a passenger.