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Learning to drive

Understanding that driving is complicated is one thing, becoming a skilled driver is another.

Lots of people can help you – your driving instructor, supervising drivers and friends. But learning to drive is mostly up to you and the only way to become a safe and skilled driver is by doing lots of supervised driving practice.

HOW DO YOU LEARN TO DRIVE?

The more you do something, the better at it you get. Athletes, musicians and artists know there is no substitute for continued practice – refining and improving skill and performance.

It is exactly the same with driving. How well you can drive is limited to the amount of driving experience, you have – the more experience the safer you will be.

Research shows that new solo drivers with about 120 hours of learner driver experience have a crash risk that is 30% lower than new drivers with only about 50 hours of experience. This is why 120 hours has been set as the target for learners in Victoria.

SOME FACTS ABOUT NEW SOLO DRIVERS

Drivers with little experience make all sorts of mistakes – increasing the risk of a crash:

- They are less able than experienced drivers to predict possible problems. By the time they have recognised the hazard it may be too late.
- They tend to concentrate more on their basic driving skills than experienced drivers and can find it hard to deal with unexpected events.
- They can be easily distracted from driving by things such as mobile phones, music or the radio, and passengers.
- They tend to watch the vehicle immediately in front rather than looking further ahead, to the sides and behind. So they may miss things that can warn of potential problems.



The only way to learn to drive is by doing lots of supervised practice

*More supervised
practice equals
fewer crashes
later on*



New solo drivers are more likely to be involved in:

- Crashes at an intersection when turning right in front of an oncoming vehicle going straight ahead, or being hit by a right turning vehicle. New solo drivers tend to misjudge gaps in the traffic.
- Crashes into the rear of another vehicle. New solo drivers are more likely to be in the vehicle that hits the one in front. These crashes are often caused through speeding, not scanning the road ahead, and driving too close.
- Crashes that involve driving off the road. These crashes occur about twice as often on a straight section of road than on a curve. Speed is a main cause, but other factors also contribute such as:
 - failing to predict a possible problem on the road ahead
 - being distracted or a lapse in concentration
 - poor vehicle control
 - failing to adapt to a change in road or traffic conditions.

Also alcohol affects safety related driving skills of inexperienced drivers compared to experienced drivers.

PRACTICE IS THE BEST WAY

Every driving practice session really helps, even though you may not notice the small improvements:

- your performance will get smoother
- you will make better decisions
- you will also get better at thinking about what might happen on the road around you.

The right structure for your practice will help you make sure you really are ready to drive solo by the time you go for your licence test. There are four stages you need to work through as a learner to become a safe driver:

- **Stage 1** is all about controlling your car. It's the shortest stage, and aims to get you to start, stop and steer safely in a quiet area without traffic.
- **Stage 2** is about applying your new car-control skills and looking out for other road users on quiet roads with little traffic.
- **Stage 3** takes longer and uses your Stages 1 and 2 skills on busier roads and in more difficult driving situations. Now you start becoming a real driver. You learn to deal with traffic and other hazards to become safe in varied driving situations.

- **Stage 4** also takes a long time and can be the longest stage. It involves driving as if you're a solo driver. You still have your Ls on the car and a supervising driver beside you, but you'll learn to make most of the driving decisions yourself. The aim is to build up lots of different experiences where you act like a solo driver. Then when you hit the road on your own you'll be ready.

The *Guide for Learners* and the *Guide for Supervising Drivers* contains detailed advice about what you and your supervising driver need to do in each of these four stages. You will be given these booklets when you pass the learner permit test.

Safe driving is about being ready for what may happen

What happens in your head is more important than how well you control your car.

Being able to predict what may happen around you – as a driver – is an essential skill, which only comes with lots of experience. With the information collected through lots of practice and experience, you begin to anticipate more and make better decisions as a driver.



HAZARD PERCEPTION is the ability to identify, assess, decide and respond to possible risks or dangers in the road scene around you.

This is known as **hazard perception**.

Hazard perception is the ability to:

- identify possible risks or dangers in the road scene around you
- assess the level of risk and predict what might happen
- respond in a way and in time to avoid or deal with these possible hazards.

Possible hazards can be the vehicles around you, such as:

- the cars in front, behind and beside you
- the motorcycle in the side street to your left
- the truck double-parked up ahead
- the car approaching in the overtaking lane five car lengths behind you.

Possible hazards can also be:

- pedestrians
- cyclists
- weather conditions
- potholes in the road
- traffic conditions
- the tightness of a curve ahead
- a blind crest on a hill.



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*You can
 only check
 everything out by
 doing
 a headcheck!*”

Hazards can be anything in the road environment that could present a danger or a risk while driving. New drivers often don't see or anticipate the possible hazards around them.

Because possible hazards can be anywhere, you can't rely on just looking ahead and using your rear view mirrors. Regardless of how well you set up your rear view mirrors, blind spots remain. These are areas behind the driver that can't be seen using only mirrors, such as outside the rear passenger door on the driver's side.

You can only see in these blind spots by moving your head and quickly looking over your shoulder – this is called a headcheck (see *headcheck* definition, page 30). Do this as well as using mirrors to make sure you see everything around you, such as when reversing, changing lanes, merging or pulling out to overtake.

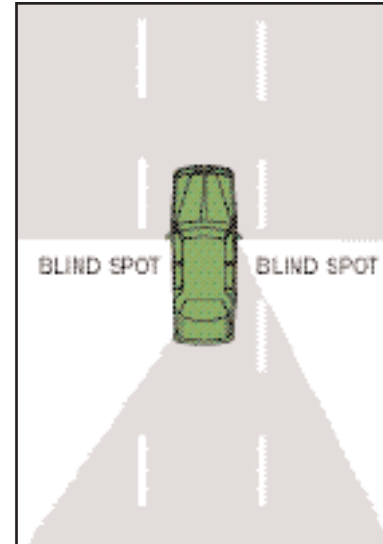


FIGURE 2

Be aware of your blind spots

As a driver, knowing exactly what is happening around you at all times is essential. Learn to constantly **scan** and you will be in a better position to anticipate hazards and respond in the best way.



To **SCAN** means taking in the road scene around you by looking ahead, to the sides and in rear view mirrors.



FIGURE 3

Adjust your mirrors after you have positioned the driver's seat so that you can see clearly. When adjusted correctly there will be an overlap between the view from your outside and inside mirrors.

Adjust your outside mirrors so that they just catch a view of the edge of the car. In some cars, a good guide is to be able to see the rear door handle in the bottom corner of the side mirror.

YOUR SUPERVISING DRIVER IS THERE TO HELP

Driving takes much more effort in the beginning, when you are learning. It is just not possible for new drivers to be able to do all that is required when driving – that is why you have your supervising driver beside you. They don't take the place of professional driving instructors, but supervising drivers such as your parents, can provide the extensive practice opportunities you will need. They are there to help you:

- with an extra pair of eyes to watch the road
- with some decisions
- as an early warning system – to help you anticipate potential hazards
- by being a sounding board – there are a lot of things to make decisions about.

Over time, and with lots of practice, as you progress through the four stages of learning to drive, the role of your supervising driver will gradually change.



To get started, have your first few lessons with a professional driving instructor

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*You can see
 the differences
 between an
 experienced and
 an inexperienced
 driver but the
 only way to get from
 one to the other is
 with lots of
 experience*”

You will take more responsibility for your driving and your supervising driver will do less.

To help your supervising driver, once you have passed your learner permit test, you will be given the *Guide for Supervising Drivers*. This booklet provides lots of advice and ideas for supervising drivers on how they can help you with driving practice.



Research shows that learner drivers with 120 hours of driving practice can reduce their risk of a crash during their first two years of solo driving by 30% compared with those who have only 50 hours of driving practice.

Your driving will develop with practice. In order to get lots of practice you need to enter a partnership with your supervising driver. This partnership is vital because you can only practise if your supervising driver agrees to let you drive.

It can be easy to find excuses for not getting the right practice you need, as you progress through each of the four stages of learning to drive. In **Stage 1** you will need to plan specific practice sessions in quiet areas without traffic. As you progress to **Stage 2** you will drive around routes you plan on quiet roads with little traffic. In **Stage 3** you will drive on busier roads and in more difficult driving situations and begin to do more normal day-to-day driving tasks. In **Stage 4** you will learn to make most of the driving decisions yourself, but still with your supervisor beside you, and you need to build your experiences in as many situations as possible.

Avoid excuses for not getting the practice you need. In particular, when you are at **Stages 3 and 4** you need practice especially when the situation is challenging, such as when:

- traffic is heavy
- conditions are bad – possibly wet and slippery at night
- the road is narrow with lots of curves.

Naturally, there will be times when it may not be appropriate for you to get behind the wheel. You need to build on your experiences gradually and not try too much too soon. However, even these times when you are not behind the wheel, can still provide you with opportunities for learning and discussion with your supervising driver. Make the most of being a passenger and develop your observation skills – think about how you would drive in these situations!

It is important that both you and your supervising driver feel comfortable with the type of practice you are getting. Gradually build up the challenges as you progress through each of the four learner stages, rather than jumping in at the deep end.



The Guide for Learners and the Guide for Supervising Drivers uses goals to help you and your supervising driver work out whether you are ready to move to the next step in building your driving experience.

PUT VARIETY INTO YOUR DRIVING PRACTICE

If you got your learner permit on or after 1 July 2007 you must keep a *Learner Log Book* as a record of your supervised driving practice (if you are under 21 years of age when you apply for a probationary licence).

You should use the *Learner Log Book* as a tool to plan the types of driving experience you need and to make sure you get plenty of driving practice in a variety of conditions. It will also tell you at glance which types of driving experience and conditions you still need to focus on.

Driving involves so many different situations and conditions. It is important to encounter as many of these as possible during your practice sessions. Increase both the amount and variety of practice to increase your chances to gain valuable driving experience.





The same stretch of road can present very different challenges, depending on the combinations of traffic and weather conditions, time of day and road users at a particular time. The only way to be sure you can deal with these different challenges is to practise often in lots of situations with your supervising driver.

Take every opportunity to practise for 10, 20, 30 minutes, or an hour. Short frequent drives are far more valuable than the occasional long drive, and at the start, shorter more frequent practice sessions are more productive and less stressful for both the learner and the supervising driver.

Remember the more supervised practice you have in a wide variety of situations and conditions, the fewer crashes you are likely to have later on.

So, what do you need to do?...*Practise often!*



QUIET CONDITIONS



BUSY CONDITIONS



The same location showing a variety of driving conditions





TRAPS ALONG THE ROAD TO SOLO DRIVING

As you progress with practice you may find that you seem to be picking things up quickly. With driving, appearances are often deceiving. It can appear that there is little left to learn after several lessons or a few dozen hours of practice – driving can seem easy. Don't fall into this trap!

You feel better... before you do better!

You will continue to learn and improve for years to come.

So don't be fooled – keep practising! You will keep getting better even though you may not be aware that your skills are improving.

Practice will build your confidence in yourself as a safe driver and this is a good thing. But don't become overconfident!

You may see early signs of improvement in your driving quite quickly – these tend to be mainly in controlling the car. What may have seemed difficult or impossible the very first time – such as just turning left – seems simple after a few lessons or a few hours behind the wheel.

However, this is misleading. There is more to driving than just car control. Driving tasks you seem to master will continue to improve for some time to come. Remember these tasks are only a small part of becoming a competent driver. That is why it is recommended that you organise your supervised driving practice around the four stages of learning to drive.

There are five different types of skills you need to develop as a driver. The first one comes relatively quickly, but the rest will develop over time with lots of practice:

- 1 *Car control* – steering, brakes, using pedals, buttons and other controls. These skills tend to come relatively quickly and can make you think you have learned it all!



If your brakes have failed:

- **pump on the brake pedal hard and fast**
 - **apply the handbrake carefully so the vehicle doesn't skid**
- 1 • **if possible, change to a lower gear (even in an automatic vehicle) and use your horn to alert other drivers**
 - 2 • **try to steer the vehicle so that you avoid a severe collision.**
- 2 *Visual scanning* – looking to the front, the sides, in the rear view mirror and taking notice of what is happening on the edge of your vision (peripheral vision). New drivers tend to look mostly to the front.
 - 3 *Thinking and responding* – includes assessing hazards and judging distances between you and other cars. This takes lots of practice to develop.

- 4 *Identifying and weighing up risks* – recognising a risk and taking the right action to deal with it takes practice. New drivers don't identify risks as quickly as experienced drivers.
- 5 *Making decisions* – deciding when to slow down and by how much, when to accelerate, what speed is best for different conditions, when to change lanes or overtake. These and many other decisions need to be made every time you drive. The ability to make the right decisions only comes with experience and lots of practice.

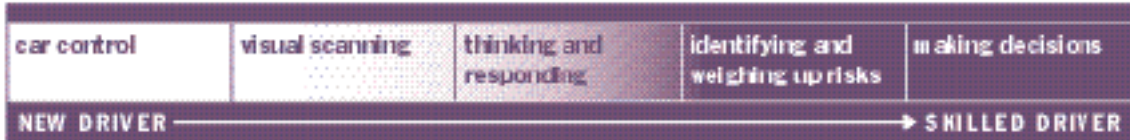


If you have a tyre blowout while driving, remember to keep a firm grip on the steering wheel, take your foot off the accelerator and brake gently once you feel the vehicle is under some control.



*Some practice may make you good some of the time.
Lots of practice will make you consistently good!*

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Smooth driving
minimises fuel
consumption,
exhaust
emissions to
the environment and
wear and
tear on
your vehicle



DRIVER SKILLS THAT DEVELOP OVER TIME WITH PRACTICE

CHECKING YOUR PROGRESS

Here are some things to look at to check on your progress as you move through the four stages of learning to drive.

Smoothness

As you become more experienced you will find your driving changes from 'clunky' and 'jerky' to 'smooth' and 'fluid' movements.

It doesn't happen straight away, but it will happen with continued practice!

Consistency

You will notice over time that your driving becomes much more consistent. The mistakes

you make – such as stalling, grating gears, hitting kerbs and running wide – will go from being once every trip...to once a day...to once a week.

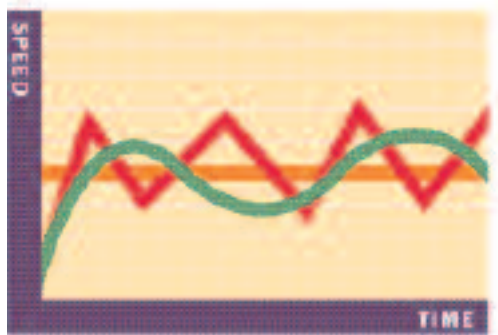
Don't make your aim just passing the licence test! Make your goal being able to drive in a consistent way without making lots of mistakes. This way passing the licence test should be easier and you won't have to take the chance of making mistakes during the test itself.

Speed Control

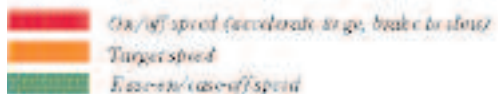
Over time and with increasing experience, your ability to control your speed on the road will improve. In the early stages, it's all black and white – accelerate to go and brake to slow down ('on/off' speed). This is shown by the red jagged line in the graph on the next page.

Gradually, with increased experience, this will change from the 'on/off' style to an 'ease-on/ease-off' style. This is shown by the curvy green line in the graph.

Better speed control goes hand-in-hand with other improvements you will experience in your driving – as you continue to practise.



SPEED CONTROL OVER TIME



Low speed manoeuvres

When things are done more slowly there is more time for mistakes to be noticed.

Low speed manoeuvres are a good way to test your performance. In a safe place with no other traffic, try:

- reversing over an extended distance – in a straight line
- driving into and reversing out of an angled parking bay.

These are good ways to assess how you're going and can be a good indication of your level of vehicle control.

Seeing the big picture!

With practice you will find that you will be able to take in more of what is going on around you. You won't be focused just on what is happening on the road immediately in front or behind you.

You will discover that you have already noticed the traffic slowing way ahead or the car signalling to

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Don't just aim at passing the test, aim at learning to drive safely!

*Most driving
shouldn't be
surprising –
not because it
is boring, but
because the
surprises
have been
anticipated!*



pull out from the kerb, before your supervising driver points it out. Gradually your supervising driver won't need to point things out to you as often.

You will develop the skill to know where to look and when to look. You will also develop the ability to quickly work out the best way to respond to different situations.

Basically, you will start looking at the big picture rather than focusing only on smaller parts.

Anticipation!

As your driving experience increases you will find that you are starting to think more about what might happen next – this is anticipation. You will find that you begin to predict the chance of:

- a car in front stopping quickly in heavy traffic
- a pedestrian walking onto the road from between parked cars
- varying road surfaces and conditions
- other situations that can happen on the road around you.

Anticipation is about being ready to respond to a situation before it happens!

Regardless of how quick your reactions are you will respond faster if you have anticipated the need for action. You need to scan the traffic and road environment all the time and expect the unexpected.

Remember you will be travelling at speeds up to 110 km/h – think about how important anticipation is!

Gaining independence

You will notice a shift in how much you rely on your supervising driver. At the start you really need the extra set of eyes and a decision maker in the car with you, helping you out. With increasing experience, you will notice you are taking more responsibility for your driving – but still with the back-up from your supervising driver if it is needed.

You can 'measure' this by thinking about:

- the amount of advice you ask for and get during your practice sessions – should I give way to the pedestrian?
- the 'warnings' provided – watch the red car!
- the decisions taken on your behalf – change lanes now because we have to turn right soon.

The changes will be gradual as you gain more experience through practice. Your aim should be to drive without relying on your supervising driver, long before you sit for your licence test.



Use the goals in the Guide for Learners and Guide for Supervising Drivers as a useful way to monitor how you are going. The more practice you do before driving solo the better prepared and safer you will be. Of course you will still keep learning while driving solo but make the most of your time as a learner driver!

Given the challenges of driving – variety and lots of practice is vital.

Remember to monitor the variety of driving practice you are getting through regularly reviewing your *Learner Log Book*.

Points to remember:

1 *Prepare for the challenge*

2 *Practise often*



*Seeing
the big
picture only
comes with
experience*

