

Pre-Driving Checks

Car sense, as an ability to handle your car successfully requires a businesslike approach to the use of its controls.

To start with, this means spending a few moments thinking about your driving tasks to get your brain and body in gear before turning the ignition key. Put out of your mind anything that might have upset you. Your full attention must be on your driving.

Before turning the key, it may surprise you about how much needs to be remembered!

- Are you driving your own vehicle or one unfamiliar to you?
- Are you sitting comfortably in the driver's seat?
- Can you reach and operate the controls satisfactorily?
- How much pressure is needed to operate each pedal smoothly?
- Which is the best technique needed to select each gear correctly?
- Do you know the location of all the minor controls?
- Are your dashboard gauges giving you any warnings?
- What sort of driving conditions do you anticipate?

According to a recent insurance company report, nearly half of drivers do not bother to adjust their seat or check their posture before they drive off, yet more than one in three drivers suffer from aches and pains (and stress) when driving. An awkward or uncomfortable position can lead to back problems, so be sure to adjust your seat to suit your height and ability to reach the driving controls.

For a comfortable position:

- bring your seat forward so that your left leg can comfortably press the clutch pedal down without overstretching. If you have an automatic vehicle, use the accelerator pedal position as a guide. Be sure that your hips and knees can be comfortably flexed
- recline the backrest of your seat so that your hands can rest at the top of the steering wheel with a slight bend in your arms. You mustn't be hunched over the steering wheel or feel the need to grip it tightly. Relax your shoulders and keep your head upright
- adjust the mirrors so that the minimum of head or body movement is needed to check them. Keep your chin in rather than out
- Also make it a rule when getting into or out of the car, to turn your whole body rather than straining and twisting. (On long journeys taking opportunities to make short frequent stops and to walk round and stretch the legs and spine will help you keep your brain and body in gear!)

Driving an unfamiliar car

This should not present a competent driver with any real problem because the main controls are in the same location, although spacing may vary a little.

By regularly driving the same car we learn an "efference copy", where the car feels part of us. We get used to its width, length, transmission type, engine responsiveness, braking and steering efficiency; we recognise the familiar engine sound and can sense

the need for a gear change; we can tell the speed our car is travelling without looking down at the speedometer and we notice the effect of extra weight and distribution of any load including passengers.

When driving a different car with an unfamiliar set up, previous learning can produce some unexpected and possibly dangerous results. In addition to our muscles having to rediscover the degree of force, direction and time required to operate and manipulate the controls successfully, we need to know where a different car manufacturer positions the levers, switches and buttons that control the indicators, headlights, windscreen wipers, heating and ventilating controls.

Driving an unfamiliar car and having to hunt round, look for and examine an auxiliary control will distract our concentration from the road and traffic, easily doubling or trebling our hazard reaction time. Any subsequent panicking will impair the decision making process putting us in real big trouble.

Holiday Motoring

You deserve your holiday. You mustn't let it be spoilt by not being properly prepared for any long journey. Modern cars are not infallible so make sure your car is properly roadworthy

Overloading the car is dangerous. If your entire luggage doesn't go in the boot, use a properly fitted roof rack. A loaded roof rack (and even an empty one) will add to the wind resistance and increase your fuel consumption, so keep an eye on the fuel gauge.

Find somewhere safe, legal and convenient to stop to take a break with some exercise at least every two and a half-hours. Frequent short stops are better than one long stop. Avoid heavy meals and alcohol before or during your journey. It may be worth travelling overnight but not after a day's work and it's always a help if you can share the driving with someone else.

Plan your route before you set off and use satellite navigation.

Additional traffic on holiday routes may cause severe congestion in some places. Over-estimate how long it's going to take you and leave enough time to get to where you are going.

Keep calm. Getting frustrated with the inevitable traffic congestion won't get you there any quicker. If you can, travel during off-peak times. Always be careful and courteous.

Keep your car radio tuned into the RDS mode for up to date travel information.