

How far apart do we need to be from the vehicle in front?

Probably the most important rule for road safety, carried forwards with little variation since the first edition of the Highway Code since 1931 is ...

“Always have your vehicle under full control and be ready and able to pull up well within the distance which you can see to be clear.”

What we learn and what we see happening on the roads is at some variance.

When learning to drive, we need to know the overall stopping distances for our theory exam. For the practical, we apply the Highway Code rule of a “two-second” time gap with the vehicle in front on dry roads.

In the real world, we learn to tolerate inconsiderate or sometimes aggressive drivers following closely behind. They may chance their luck and overtake, cutting sharply in front of you. If we succumb to their pressure and drive closer than we should, then we increase our risk of colliding with the vehicle in front. There will be no question about who is at fault in that scenario.

Despite magnificent improvements in vehicle braking technology, the stopping distances given in the Highway Code have not been changed since they were first published in 1956. This is largely because today’s drivers are still distracted, possibly more so with the advance on in-car technology and entertainment. The assumed 0.7 second reaction time in reality is closer to two seconds. That is the “thinking” time it takes to recognise a road hazard and begin the physical process of braking. Then add to that the “braking” distance, which is how far the car has to travel before it can stop.

While many drivers overestimate their ability and feel that the stopping distances are too long for modern vehicles, the research people have a different story. Studies carried out by the Transport Research Laboratory (TRL) in 2017 suggest that the overall stopping distances given in the Highway Code should be increased.

So, we keep with the Highway Code. Our images shows the expected stopping distances, given in imperial and metric measurements, as well as car lengths.