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Traffic safety bulletin

Get a Grip on Winter

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We get used to how forgiving a dry, summer road is, so to not get caught by surprise in November, drivers need to start practicing the skills now that everybody else seems to forget about winter driving.

Preventing emergencies is always easier than escaping emergencies and driving is no different. The most common collision type we have in Ontario is the single vehicle crash. It's easy to see that choosing a speed appropriate for the conditions is the best way to not go bouncing off the guardrails. Somebody always does this before the ploughs are out and the rest of us are stuck in their traffic jam. The second most common collision type is the rear-ender. Maintaining at least a three second space from the vehicle ahead is the simplest way to not jump into someone else's trunk.

Smoothness is critical to maintaining control in winter conditions. Lane changes should be measured in millimeters of steering wheel movement and braking should always begin with a feather light touch on the pedal. The only exception to this is to intentionally engage the Anti-lock Braking System (ABS) by slamming the brake pedal hard and maintaining pressure. Even with the ABS activated, you can still steer enough to change lanes if you run out of space.

Although these preventive actions are not complicated or hard to understand, drivers still get it wrong because they have to rely on skid control skills that they don't practice very often.

What scares drivers most about skidding is the sense that the car is rotating out of control. The question for this week is, **"Which of your senses do you use to correct a skid?"** The correct answer is vision.

Picture driving across a completely flat landscape, empty except for a visible target point, like a grain elevator, at the vanishing point where road and sky meet. As long as the car is traveling in a straight line, the target point will appear to get closer but not move to the left or right within the field of vision through the windshield. If the car is steered to the left, the target would appear to move to the right. To continue looking at the target, the driver would move their eyes or even turn their head to the right. This motivates the driver to steer right, re-centering the car in

the lane relative to the target point on the horizon.

Drivers who habitually aim their vision more distantly along a line that is parallel with the road perceive even slight deviations from straight more easily than drivers who look at the road or the car directly ahead. They steer straight more accurately, corner more smoothly, respond to crosswinds better and have families that consume less Graval. Targets like overhead signs, bridges and traffic lights that are 15 to 30 seconds ahead along the path of travel serve as surrogate horizon points. As long as you are not tailgating, these targets are high enough that they can be seen over an average passenger vehicle size ahead. We constantly meet experienced drivers in training courses who wonder why they had never been taught this visual targeting concept.

When targeting properly, the driver sees in a split second that the target is moving laterally and steers to correct the skid. It will only be a few fractions of a second until the car spins completely around, so the steering correction will have to be decisive and powerful. This flies in the face of the accepted mantra about being careful to not overcorrect. A car spins usually because the driver has not steered quickly or aggressively enough.

The target point will stop moving across the windshield when the correct amount of steering input is achieved. This means that the front tires, which do the steering, are in line with the vector that the car is traveling on. The car is still skidding sideways, but at least the angle is not getting any wider. This is the beginning point for the notorious second skid that everyone is even more afraid of. Again the driver has to steer aggressively to correct a skid that is changing angle even faster than the first one.

Braking at any point during the correction would only make things worse by assuring that the one end of the car will grip worse than the other, further disrupting the balance.

Correcting skids is a lot harder than preventing them. I hope I have given you motivation through this article to put the prevention steps into practice now, so that you won't look like the one who has forgotten how to drive in the winter.

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