General Safety Instructions

Truck driver safety, and the safety of other drivers on the road, is of utmost importance. The good news is that the Large Truck Fatal Crash Rate has steadily declined by 74% from 1980 to 2014. However, there are still 500,000 truck accidents every year, although only approximately 16% of those are caused by truck driver fault.

If you, the truck driver, do happen to cause an accident, the consequences and negative effects are serious. Your CDL may be disqualified for a certain period of time, and it will be tough getting any type of driving job in the future if you are convicted of any of these violations:

* Driving a commercial motor vehicle without the proper license, permit, or endorsement (or not having it in your possession)
* Speeding 15 mph or more over the speed limit
* Improper or erratic lane change
* Following too closely
* Texting or using a handheld mobile telephone while driving
* Reckless driving
* Committing an offense that results in a fatality

General Trucking Safety Tips

Wear Seat Belts

Airbags are not enough. In 2016 alone, 10,428 lives were lost in cases where the individual was not wearing a seatbelt. Not only does buckling up keep you safe and conscious while inside your vehicle if it crashes, it also protects you from being ejected from your vehicle (which almost always kills).

* To ensure proper fitting and, therefore, the greatest safety, follow these guidelines:
* Secure the lap belt across your pelvis or hips, not your stomach.
* Secure the shoulder belt across the rib cage. Don’t let it rub against your neck.
* Never put the shoulder belt behind your back or under an arm.
* If you need a roomier belt, contact your vehicle manufacturer to obtain a seat belt extender.

Avoid Distracted Driving

Distracted driving is a lead cause of accidents on the road. There are three types of distracted driving:

* Visual (e.g. adjusting your GPS maps)
* Manual (e.g. eating)
* Cognitive (e.g. road rage)

Perhaps the most common type of distracted driving these days comes from cell phones and other tech devices. You are about four times more likely to crash if you are using a cell phone. When considering how often cell phone use can occur during a drive, especially a long one, the risk rises significantly.

That’s why a new Mobile Phone Restriction Rule for Commercial Motor Vehicle Drivers restricts the use of all handheld mobile devices while driving. This rule bans using at least one hand to hold a phone or make a call, dialing by pressing more than a single button, and even reaching for a phone in a manner that requires the driver to move out of a seated driving position.

**Breaking this law comes with penalties up to $2,750 for the driver and can result in driver disqualification.**

If you must make a call while driving, you can still stay in compliance by:

* Keeping the phone within close proximity.
* Utilizing voice-activated or one-touch dialing.
* Using an earpiece or the speaker phone function.

Avoid other behavior that requires too much use of your hands, your brain, or your eyes. If you see a distracted driver, pull ahead or slow down in order to give them more space for error. If necessary, report them to the police.

Follow Local Laws and Speed Limits

Whether you drive intrastate (exclusively in one state) or interstate (passing state lines), you must always be aware of the local driving laws and speed limits, as they vary by state (as do the penalties for breaking the law).

Drive Defensively

Defensive driving is a driving technique that all drivers should use every time they get behind the wheel. The benefit of driving defensively is that you are better prepared to keep yourself and others safe.

* Specific defensive driving techniques include:
* Expecting the unexpected
* Controlling your speed
* Watching and preparing for the reactions of other drivers
* Driving appropriately for any weather and/or road condition
* Being alert and free of distractions
* Respecting other drivers

Semi-Truck Braking Distance

There’s a simple formula for determining the proper braking distance of a semi. You must add together these three distances to come up with your total braking distance while taking your total weight into consideration:

* **Perception Distance:**The time it takes an alert driver to see a hazard and their brain to recognize it is about ¾ of a second. At 55 mph a truck will travel 60 feet in that miniscule amount of time.
* **Reaction Distance:** The time it takes a driver’s brain to tell the driver to brake is another ¾ of a second, during which a truck going 55 mph will travel an additional 60 feet.
* **Braking Distance:**The time it takes the truck to stop once the brake has been applied is about 4 seconds. For a heavy vehicle at 55 mph, that means it can take another 390 feet to come to a complete stop.

Adding these three distances together, it will take about 6 seconds to stop a truck traveling at 55 mph and it will have traveled about 512 feet. The heavier the truck and the faster it is traveling, the greater the braking distance will need to be. Also, a wet road can easily double your stopping distance, so a safe driver will reduce speed to about 35 mph, or about one-third. Ice will require an even slower driving speed in order to stop safely.

Skidding/Sliding Tips

A skid can happen by over-steering, over-braking, over-accelerating, or just plain driving too fast. Skids that occur due to ice or snow can be stopped easily by taking your foot off the accelerator. If needed, push the clutch in. The engine will help you regain traction.

If your rear-drive wheels lock, the vehicle will slide sideways in a spin-out and cause a jackknife. To correct this type of skid, stop braking, turn quickly in the direction you want the truck to go, and then counter-steer quickly the other way so you don’t start skidding in the opposite direction.

For front-wheel skids, you may not be able to steer at all due to the front wheels not having enough traction. The only way to stop this type of skid is to let the truck slow down by itself.

Turning a Semi-Truck

As far as turning goes, it’s not always quite as simple as it seems. Because of the wide turning radius of semi-trucks, it is extremely important to be fully aware of the space around you, especially when driving off-highway and on busier roads.

* Turning Right: Turn wide but keep the rear of your truck close to the curb.
* Turning Left: Get into the center of the intersection before starting your turn. Always take the right-hand turn lane if there is one, as other vehicles are more visible from the left.

If you get stuck somewhere, you can either get a slight rocking motion going by simultaneously engaging the clutch while feathering the fuel (if you have a manual transmission truck); otherwise you may need to get pulled forward by a wrecker. Obviously, it’s better not to get stuck in the first place.

Avoiding Traffic

Here are a few tips to avoid traffic, thus lowering your risk and getting you to your destination quicker:

* Check local news and radio reports for road conditions.
* Plan trips in advance and when traffic is low.
* As always, leave ample space in front of the vehicle for breaking.
* Change lanes as little as possible.
* Use a truck route GPS.

Truck Driver Safety Tips for Winter Driving

Driving gets much more dangerous in the winter. To keep your truck driving as safely as possible, it’s imperative to get your tires ready for the weather and to follow good winter driving practices.

Winter Tires

Winter tires give your truck the best possible traction in harsh winter conditions below 45 degrees. Unlike regular tires, they feature heavy siping for added traction and deep circumferential grooves for expelling snow and slush.

Adding tire chains to your semi’s tires is another option. Chains provide great traction in snow and other slippery conditions if they are properly affixed. Make sure the state in which you are driving allows chains.

Best Practices for Driving in the Snow

Other than going slow and maintaining a safe driving distance, there are a few other things to keep in mind when trucking through the snow. Do your “circle check” before heading out, keep your truck lights clean and in good working order, and make sure your fuel tanks are topped off.

If the snow becomes severe while you are driving, don’t worry about not meeting your schedule and instead pull off the road until it is safe to drive again. DO NOT stop on the shoulder of the road, especially in low-visibility situations. Other vehicles may mistake you for driving on the road and inadvertently slam into the back of your rig.

Heavy Storms Safety

It’s dangerous to be driving your semi on the road during a heavy storm, but driving after a storm can also be challenging. Roads can still be slippery, hail can act like loose gravel, debris may be covering the road, and flash flooding and landslides are possible.

Here’s another warning: there can be lightning strikes or downed power lines during and after a storm. If an electric line is touching your truck, DO NOT get out. Stay inside and call for help.

Above all, take caution to avoid hydroplaning during heavy rain. If you find yourself hydroplaning, take your foot off the accelerator and push in the clutch. DO NOT apply your break. Hydroplaning is dangerous and can occur even at speeds of only 30 mph.

What to Do in Extreme Weather Situations

While it’s not practical to avoid all storms, you should always be aware of dangerous conditions and drive according to these storm safety tips. It’s also imperative that you are familiar with these extreme weather warnings:

* Severe Thunderstorm Watch means possible hail and wind gusts up to 58 mph. Always keep both hands on the steering wheel.
* Severe Thunderstorm Warning means a severe thunderstorm is occurring and can last 30-60 minutes. Take the proper precautions for driving in slippery conditions and know how to steer out of a skid.
* Tornado Watch means tornadoes may develop in the area and you should be prepared to take cover if needed.
* Tornado Warning means a tornado has been spotted and you should take cover immediately. Avoid stopping under bridges or tunnels and get down low.

Mountain/Canyon Driving Safety

Driving a semi-truck through the mountains requires sharp focus on the road and complete control over your big rig. Watch other drivers closely and keep an eye out for wildlife. Be sure you have all your safety equipment (including a first aid kit) with you and get yourself up to date on the terrain you’ll be traversing.

Best Practices for Ascending and Descending

When ascending mountain passes, it’s best to downshift gears to maintain enough pull on your truck so it doesn’t stop. Keep track of your RPMs and find the sweet spot that keeps you from needing to shift constantly.

When descending, always use a lower gear than you used when ascending. If your foot brake fails, keep your hands firmly on the steering wheel and keep it driving as straight as possible. Use a runaway truck ramp and be prepared for a quick deceleration.

Best Practices for Going Around Curves and Tight Turns

Before entering a turn, reduce your speed while your truck is still straight. Allow adequate space for maintaining your lane while navigating tights curves and always bring the front of your truck closer to the high side of the curves. This maintains control of your trailer. Never swing in order to catch an exit, as last-minute turns are very dangerous due to the shifting weight of the truck and cargo.

Night Driving Safety

Driving a semi-truck at night can be a challenge. Fatigue inevitably sets in and your body will force you to sleep. Many drivers avoid night driving, and that’s not a bad idea. But every once in a while, it can’t be avoided.

To keep yourself safe when driving under the stars, be sure to do the following:

* Get your eyes checked and make sure you have corrective lenses if needed.
* Give night vision glasses a try.
* Keep your windows and mirrors clean to reduce glare.
* Know your body’s sleep signals.
* Park in a quiet spot next to other sleeping night drivers.

Avoid Fatigue

Long daily and weekly hours are a fact of life for truck drivers. Unfortunately, such long hours cause driver fatigue, and an increase in driver fatigue also increases the risk of chronic health conditions and truck accidents. To help combat fatigue (and its associated risks), eat a healthy diet, fit in some simple exercises between drives, and get enough sleep.

Other tricks of the trade include listening to an audiobook, calling a friend or family member, turning the temperature down, avoiding large doses of caffeine, and turning down your dash lights (bright lights tire your eyes). Just remember, no number of tricks will actually keep you awake when your body is simply ready to sleep. When that time comes, don’t try to push through it. Pull over and take a nap.

Truck Driving Schedule

With all the variables that can happen (weather, loading/unloading delays, breakdowns, traffic, etc.), it’s nearly impossible to keep to a very strict truck driving schedule of your own personal choosing. That’s why most truck drivers decide to follow the Hours of Service Regulations for their truck driving schedule.

A summary is as follows:

* May drive a maximum of 11 hours after 10 consecutive hours off-duty.
* May not drive beyond the 14th consecutive hour after coming on-duty, following 10 consecutive hours off-duty.
* May drive only if 8 hours or less have passed since the end of a driver’s last off-duty or sleeper berth period of at least 30 minutes.
* May not drive after 60/70 hours on-duty in 7/8 consecutive days.
* Drivers using the sleeper berth provision must take at least 8 consecutive hours in the sleeper berth and may choose to split this into two periods of at least 2 consecutive hours either in the sleeper berth, off-duty, or any combination of the two.

It’s important to remember that these regulations are for your own safety and well-being and should not be disregarded under any circumstances.

Conclusion

Trucking is not just a job, but comes with a lifestyle all its own. The long hours on lengthy drives can take its toll, but if you follow these truck driver safety tips, you’ll return home safely again and again.