

## 6 Dangerous Vehicle Emergency Situations — And How to Handle Them

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Emergencies happen on the road. While many drivers travel safely without incident, others experience dangerous situations that call for knowledge and skill to stay safe. Getting stuck in a sinking vehicle, losing your brakes, tire blowouts, and other serious vehicle emergencies can happen any day, at any time. Are you prepared to handle these situations? Learn what you need to do to survive these emergencies and more.

### Escaping a Submerged Vehicle

Water is everywhere — even in landlocked states. The threat of ending up in a submerged vehicle is obvious if you live near large bodies of water, but don't discount the danger of large ponds, rivers, streams, and even drainage ditches.

A sinking car is quite possibly every driver's worst nightmare: you're stuck in a vehicle that's headed down into the water, and your doors won't open. Your windows aren't working either. What can you do?

Time is of the essence in a sinking vehicle, but the most important thing you can do is not panic. It is possible to survive this situation — but you'll have to act quickly. Follow these steps for a safe escape from a submerged vehicle:

- **Roll your windows down:** Once you're in the water, it's difficult if not impossible to get your windows down. But if you're able to get them rolled down before you submerge, you'll have an easier time escaping, either through the window or through the door as water equalizes inside and out of your car. It may be difficult to remember to get your windows down in the initial shock of hitting the water, but if you can, it just might save your life.
- **Immediately remove your seat belt:** [Avi Goldstein](#) says this is the first step to safety. He notes that if there was a collision before going into the water, you may have trouble getting to the seat belt button, or your seat belt may be jammed — and getting out of your seat is essential to getting out of the car. You may need to use a seat belt cutting device. Take care of this step first so that you'll be free to maneuver out. If you have children or incapacitated passengers, help them to get unbuckled as well, and move them into area of escape with you. Note, however, that you should hold on to your steering wheel or other sturdy object so that you can stay steady even if water is rushing in or you're floating in the vehicle.
- **Open a window:** Your doors won't open until water has almost completely flooded your vehicle. That leaves you with very little time to escape if you're unable to get out of a window — so a window is your first choice of escape. Even if you're underwater, try to open your windows, as some electric windows may still work for a short period of time. If that doesn't work, try to break a window first before attempting to open any doors. A rescue tool that can break glass can be life saving in this situation, allowing you to quickly escape out of a window instead of waiting to open doors. If you don't have a rescue tool available, consider removing the head restraint from your car seat back and using it to break the glass. Break a side window, which will be less thick than the windshield, and hit corners rather than the center of the window, as corners tend to be easier to break.
- **Take a deep breath and open a door:** If you're unable to break a window, don't give up. Though it's practically impossible to open a door when you're sinking, once your vehicle is mostly filled with water, pressure will equalize and allow you to open it. Get to the top of your vehicle and take deep breaths until you're able to open the door and escape.
- **Float to the surface:** After escaping, you may be disoriented, especially if you're in the water at night. But relax — if you've taken a deep breath, you'll float up. Don't panic, and allow your body to naturally find the way up before you start swimming. Remember to carefully hold on to children or incapacitated passengers.

## Avoiding a Car Fire

Car fires are incredibly dangerous, and can overtake your vehicle in a matter of minutes. And they're more common than you might think: the [National Fire Protection Association](#) reports that there are 33 car fires every hour, every day in the U.S., and one person per day died in car fire incidents between 2003 and 2005. Poor maintenance, oil leaks, bad fuses, and other mechanical issues are often to blame for the start of fires. How can you save yourself from a car fire?

- **Regularly maintain your vehicle:** Keeping your car in good working order is the first step to avoiding a car fire. Regular oil changes, fixed leaks, and inspections can help stop fires before they start, and identify any dangerous conditions before they become a problem. Fuses that blow more than once are a serious red flag, as they may be a sign that you have a problem with your electrical system.
- **Know the early warning signs:** Any burning smell coming from your vehicle should set you on alert. Burning plastic or rubber has a distinct smell. If you see or smell smoke or burning and you suspect it's coming from your vehicle, do not hesitate to pull over immediately. Don't try to make it home or to the mechanic. Just pull over.
- **Turn off the engine:** Keeping your car running may only fuel the fire, so it's safest to turn your engine off as soon as you can. Get off the road, then flip the ignition off.
- **Just get out:** When you first pull over, it may not be clear yet how serious the fire is. Better to play it safe than sorry. Get out and get clear of the area as soon as you can. Do not rummage for items in your car, either. You can replace a cell phone or wallet, but not your life.
- **Call for help:** Car fires are a serious matter and can get out of control quickly. Call the fire department for help so that you can avoid danger to yourself and other vehicles on the road.
- **Get a fire extinguisher — maybe:** It's best not to try to fight a car fire yourself, but if you've caught it early and you have a fire extinguisher handy, you may be able to manage it before the fire department arrives. If the fire is small and still under the hood, crack it slightly and spray between the gap. Do not open the hood, as this will feed the fire with oxygen. Do not attempt to put out fires in the rear of the vehicle near the gas tank, and get away as quickly as possible.
- **Clear the area:** The safest thing is to simply get away from a burning car. Get passengers and onlookers away from the vehicle. Toxic fumes can be very dangerous, and while rare, car explosions can happen, resulting in increased fire and projectiles that may come out and hit anyone nearby from many feet away.

## Handling a Tire Blowout

A tire blowout is a jarring experience, and one that often happens while traveling at high speeds. It's dangerous to lose the use of a tire, and it's even more dangerous when it happens at 60 miles per hour.

With a blowout, you're at risk of losing control of your vehicle if you're not careful. How can you handle this situation safely?

- **Carefully maintain your tires:** Often, tire blowouts happen because tires are under inflated. Regularly check your tire pressure and tread level to make sure your tires are safe.
- **Stay calm and hold on to your steering wheel:** It's easy to panic when your tire blows, but that's the last thing you want to do. Your instinct will be to slam on the brakes and turn off to the side — don't. Hold on to your steering wheel so that you can retain control of your vehicle.
- **Continue to press on the gas:** It sounds counterintuitive to continue driving on a blown tire, but pressing the gas can put you in control of the vehicle and help you stay going straight. Don't jam down the pedal, but gently depress it for a couple seconds, then gently release. *Do not* press the brakes yet.
- **Drive straight and slow down:** With your foot off of the gas and brake pedals, allow your vehicle to slow down. Continue to drive straight in your lane, as turning at a high speed can be very dangerous.
- **Drift — carefully — to the shoulder:** Once your vehicle has slowed down to a reasonable speed (about 20-30 mph), begin to move over to the shoulder. Do not make sudden turns. Gently guide your vehicle to the side of the road that's on the same side as the blown tire. If you're able, simply drive off of the highway, as a parking lot will be a much safer place to change your tire than the side of the road.

### Surviving a Snow or Ice Storm

Winter weather brings tough driving conditions. If you're driving in snow or ice, especially during a storm, there's always a chance you'll get stuck or stranded on the road. It can even happen [in the middle of your commute](#). How can you stay alive and safe if you end up stuck in your car during winter weather storms?

- **Avoid driving in dangerous winter conditions:** It may be easier said than done, but if you know driving conditions will be challenging, simply stay where you are. It's safest to avoid roads completely if your area is facing a storm.
- **Prepare with supplies:** If you know you'll be driving through a wintery area — storm or not — stock your vehicle with essential survival supplies. Wool blankets, hand warmers, nonperishable food, and water are a good place to start.
- **Escape if you can, and ask for help:** If you're in the middle of a storm, the situation is only likely to get worse. Before you settle in, do your very best to make it out first. Flag down other drivers to ask for help, and call for help from authorities if your cell phone is working. Let others know where you are and that you are in danger.

- **Do not start a fire:** Your car is an enclosed space, and in any enclosed space, a fire, even a small candle, can generate poisonous carbon monoxide. It's best not to start a fire inside your car, but if you do, make sure that you crack a window to ventilate the carbon monoxide.
- **Watch for tailpipe snow:** Running your car heater to stay warm is a good idea, but be careful. If your exhaust is backed up with snow, carbon monoxide has nowhere to go, and can poison passengers inside. Consider turning your car off and on for brief periods to warm up, check the tailpipe, and turn it off to save fuel and stay safe.
- **Do not leave your car:** Unless you have shelter available nearby, your car is the safest place to be. It's dangerous to walk outside in extremely cold weather, and if you're in a storm, it's easy to get disoriented and lost. It's best to simply wait out the storm in your car and get out when it clears.

### Managing Hot Brakes on a Mountain Road

Driving down steep inclines can be a little nerve-wracking, and you may find yourself riding the brakes a little too hard. This is a mistake, as using your brakes too much can cause them to overheat and get soft. What's the best way to get down a mountain without overusing the brakes?

- **Avoid using your gas pedal:** If you're on a steep incline, the easiest way to manage your speed is to simply let the weight of your vehicle propel you down the road. Use your gas pedal sparingly, if at all, and you can stay at slower speeds without frequently using the brake.
- **Gently pump your brakes:** You may feel panicked as you take curves on a mountain road, but avoid the temptation to slam on your brakes. Instead, gently pump them so you're not riding them, but still getting stopping power.
- **Use a lower gear:** Driving in a lower gear can help keep your car at a safe speed without the use of brakes. Use gears 1, 2, or L.

### Stopping Your Car Without Brakes

Brake failure is a frightening situation. Your car is moving — and you can't stop it. It's a dangerous situation that can cause serious accidents, and even death. But it is possible to safely stop your car without the use of brakes:

- **Know the symptoms of brake failure:** There are often many warning signs before brakes fail. Don't ignore warning lights on your dash, or a squealing sound from your brakes. Pay attention if your wheel shakes when you press on the brakes, or if your pedal feels soft or spongy.
- **Regularly maintain your brake system:** Stay safe with regular brake checkups and maintenance. Consult your driver's manual to find out how often your

brakes should be checked. And of course, ask a mechanic for help if you hear squeaking coming from your brakes.

- **Take your foot off the gas:** If you don't have brakes, you'll need to stop by simply slowing down. You can't do that if your foot is on the gas. Take the first step and avoid pressing the gas pedal.
- **Pull over:** At the first sign of brake trouble, start pulling over to the side of the road or an exit. This will allow you to manage your problem without dealing with other drivers moving at high speeds. Remember to use your signal.
- **Pump your brakes:** Even if your brakes are failing, it may be possible to rebuild pressure in the system by pumping your brake pedal. After pumping, squeeze your brakes to use the pressure you've built up and keep the pedal squeezed down.
- **Shift to a lower gear:** Your engine can help you slow down if you move into a lower gear. If you're in an automatic, move down to 2 or 1. On a manual, simply downshift through the gears as you slow down.
- **Engage your emergency brake:** Your emergency brake is there for emergencies — use it. It can stop a vehicle if your regular brakes aren't working. But be careful, as engaging your emergency brake at high speeds or in a sudden movement can cause you to lose control. As you engage the emergency brake, keep the release button pressed down so that you can manage the pressure. Gently apply the emergency brake for a slow stop.
- **Find a safe spot to pull over:** You may need to make a crash landing if you can't stop your vehicle with other methods. Look for shrubs, bushes, tall grass, or sand that can slow your car down. Do not crash head on into trees, objects, or other vehicles.