Avoiding rear end collisions

According to the National Highway Safety Administration, rear end collisions are one of the most common types of accidents. These types of collisions, in which one vehicle strikes the back of another vehicle, are also the most common type of vehicle accident reported to Markel. While very few are deadly, they can cause a wide range of injuries and damages that can impact your organization dramatically.

There may be those that think that rear end accidents are unavoidable, but that is not always the case. Rear end accidents are often the evidence of following too closely (especially in wet or icy conditions). They also often occur because drivers are distracted or speeding. Rear end accidents are often preventable – a term used by professional drivers wherein the driver strives to do everything reasonable to avoid the collision. There are many (reasonable) steps your organization can encourage and follow to reduce the risks of being involved in a rear end accident.

Before going on the road (some questions you can ask):

1. Have all of your vehicles been properly inspected?
   - Are the brake lights functioning correctly?
   - Are the brakes working properly?
   - Are the turn signals functioning correctly?
   - Do your drivers properly adjust their mirrors before pulling onto the roadway?
   - Do your vehicle tires have adequate tread depth? (Consumer Reports now recommends 4/32 inch – twice that of the old "Lincoln penny head test" – use a quarter now instead of a penny.)
   - Are the lights (headlights, taillights, blinkers and back-up lights) and reflective surfaces all clean and working properly?
   - Will the windshield wipers provide good visibility during rain or snow?
   - Are the windshields and windows clean both inside and outside?

2. Can your driver(s) react quickly if necessary (well rested, no prescription medicine that can impact reaction times, etc.)?

3. Have your drivers been provided defensive driving training, and trained on how to avoid rear-end collisions?

4. Do you have a policy that disallows following too closely?

Alert and attentive driving

Even with all of your vehicle systems working properly, there still is no substitute for alert and attentive driving. You should make sure that your drivers receive training to help them understand how to use sensible steps to remain alert and aware of their surroundings. These will help them reduce their chances of being involved in a rear end collision.
1. **Encourage your drivers to use their rear-view mirrors to avoid being rear ended.** Drivers should always use the inside rear-view mirror to see what is directly behind them, while using the outside mirrors to view the surrounding area behind their vehicle. Train your drivers to get into the habit of checking mirrors frequently as they drive. The National Safety Council advocates scanning both side and rear mirrors every five to eight seconds while driving and again whenever slowing or stopping. It’s also important to check mirrors before reducing speed or making a turn to avoid other vehicles.

2. **Drivers should leave plenty of space between their vehicle and those in front and behind them.** A safe following distance is one that will allow the driver to perceive the car in front braking, put on their brake and stop the car safely. This will also give the person behind enough time to react and stop safely.
   - The National Safety Council and several DMVs recommend using a 4 second following rule during normal daytime driving conditions.
     - Choose an object like a tree, sign or an overpass on the road ahead to use as a fixed reference point.
     - As soon as the vehicle in front passes that point, the driver should start counting: one thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, one thousand four.
     - If the driver passes the object before finishing counting, then they were following too closely.
     - If they finish counting before they pass the object, then they have established a good following distance.
   - Proper distances should also be maintained from the vehicle in front even if it is not moving (such as waiting for a traffic light). Doing this will allow the front vehicle to roll slightly backwards (if on a hill for instance) without encroaching on your drivers space. Doing this will also allow your driver to pull around the vehicle in front if it is stalled out.
   - Drivers should not allow tailgating – it is very common for drivers to follow too closely to the vehicle in front of them. If a driver notices this, they should gradually slow down so that the tailgater can go around them. If that does not work, they can try to change lanes or pull off to the side when it is safe to do so.

3. **Increase following distances as conditions worsen.** Depending on weather and road conditions, four seconds may not be enough following distance. The conditions outside the vehicle might make it harder to notice hazards and more difficult for the brakes to stop the vehicle. Both the National Safety Council recommends increasing following distances whenever:
   - **Driving on roads that are slippery.** Rain, ice and snow - even leaves can all cause roads to become slippery.
   - **Visibility is decreasing.** All drivers should increase following distances as it gets darker. They should also increase distances when other conditions limit how far they can see. Things such as fog, rain, snow and even the sun low in the sky can all affect visibility and necessitate increasing following distances.
   - **Following a vehicle that stops frequently** such as delivery vehicles, garbage trucks or buses. Increasing following distances allows more time to react to the frequent stops.
   - **Following a vehicle that blocks the view of the road ahead.** Increasing following distances will keep your driver out of the vehicles blind spot and provide better visibility.

4. **Being aware of surroundings.**
   - Your drivers should always be alert to the conditions around their vehicle, scanning the road ahead as well as monitoring conditions to the sides of their vehicle, behind and above the vehicle. By being alert to conditions as soon as possible will allow for more time to react to unexpected situations such as a stalled vehicle ahead, a fallen tree branch on the road, or an ambulance coming up from behind. More reaction time will allow your drivers time to make alternative decisions to slamming on the brakes such as switching lanes, pulling off the road or turning off on to another road.
   - Drivers should always pay attention to when drivers in front uses their brake lights.
   - Drivers should always pay attention to the flow of traffic, and as long as weather and road conditions allow, keep up with the flow.
   - Encourage your drivers to anticipate potentially hazardous situations that could cause the driver in front to suddenly stop, such as a child coming out onto the roadway between two parked cars to retrieve a ball or toy. Scanning down the road ahead allows your drivers time to react.
   - Encourage your drivers try to avoid other drivers blind spots.
   - Train your drivers to be aware of aggressive drivers. Whenever they see an aggressive driver, they should strive to move away from them as safely and quickly as possible.
   - Drivers should not multi-task when driving. Diverting attention away from driving greatly reduces the driver’s situational awareness and increases the chances of not being able to
appropriately respond to their surroundings.

5. **Being predictable.**
   A key to safe driving is communicating driving intentions to the other driver. Sudden stops or abrupt lane changes can greatly increase the risk of a crash. Train your drivers to:
   - Always signal for lane changes or turning. Allow enough time for other drivers to see the turn signal.
   - Plan ahead when making a turn and enter the appropriate lane beforehand.
   - Brake early rather than stopping suddenly; drivers should slow gradually when making a turn or approaching a red light or stop sign.
   - Not to cut in line. This simple grade school courtesy rule also applies to driving. Many rear end collisions come from careless lane changes that stem from impatience. Drivers should always make sure there is adequate room to make lane changes, plan to do so in advance and use their turn signals to indicate their intentions.

By driving in a predictable manner, your drivers will be able to keep a "safety space" around their vehicle and give them more options and more time to react to unanticipated situations.

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**Conclusion**

Rear end collisions are often preventable. Organizations can do much to lessen their chances of rear end accidents if they develop driver safety programs that promote their drivers keep a safe following distance between vehicles, obey speed limits, don’t engage in distracting activities such as texting while driving, be aware of their surrounding and drive in a manner that communicates their intentions to others.

**References and additional resources:**

The National Safety Council - [nsc.org](http://www.nsc.org)
This is the site has many resources for driver safety.

National Highway Transportation Safety Administration - [nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/)
This is an excellent site when looking for assistance in driver safety. It provides statistics, brochures, posters, and topical and seasonal promotions.

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration - [fmcsa.dot.gov](http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/)
The FMCSA is focused on reducing crashes, injuries and fatalities involving large vehicles. This site includes reports on companies’ safety records, safety materials and statistics that can be used in developing a driver safety program.

Federal Department of Labor (OSHA) - [osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov)
Federal DOL site with a good selection of links to other government sites related to fleet safety.

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