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Avoiding highway havoc

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U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center

It's inevitable that just about every motorist will experience some sort of roadside emergency in their lifetime. Fortunately, by following a few safety precautions, they can help prevent a bad situation from becoming worse.

The U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration estimates there are about 4,000 pedestrian fatalities and 59,000 pedestrian injuries annually from roadway crashes. According to subject matter experts at the U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center, in many cases these types of accidents can be prevented.

In the event of a roadside emergency, personal safety should be the top priority for the motorist and anyone that might stop to render assistance, said Lt. Col. Joseph Harvey, director of the USACRC's Driving Directorate. That means being aware of your surroundings and all associated hazards.

"Awareness is the key to safety at any roadside emergency scene," Harvey said. "Knowing the hazards and how to work around them will help ensure everyone's safety."

Harvey said motorists should never exit their vehicles on a busy highway to attempt a repair. Instead, turn on the vehicle's emergency hazard lights and move to a safe location before attempting to fix the problem, even if doing so could result in further damage, such as driving on a wheel following a tire blowout.

If the vehicle is inoperable, Harvey said it's safer to wait inside and use a cellphone to call for assistance.

"Standing on the side of a busy road is always a bad idea," Harvey said. "You can never be sure other motorists will see you, especially at night. Our bodies are not built to withstand being struck by 2 tons of metal traveling at highway speeds. However, your vehicle is, so you're better off remaining buckled up inside."

Harvey recommends motorists be prepared for the unexpected by carrying a roadside emergency kit in their vehicles. In addition to items such as jumper cables, a jack and other emergency supplies, ensure the kit contains flags, flares or reflective triangles, which can mark your location for roadside assistance and warn others there's trouble ahead.

Conversely, it's important other motorists remember to be extra cautious when approaching and passing a roadside emergency. If safe to do so, move your vehicle from the lane closest to the stationary vehicle. If it appears the motorist is in need of assistance, call 911 to notify emergency responders of the vehicle's location.

Many auto insurance companies provide some type of roadside assistance coverage in their policies. Offerings can include free vehicle towing to a repair shop, flat-tire changing and fuel delivery, so it's a good idea to know beforehand what assistance your insurance carrier provides and have their phone number handy.

Above all, Harvey said the key to successfully navigating a roadside emergency is safety awareness.

"Too often a vehicle breakdown ends in tragedy," Harvey said. "Putting safety first during a roadside emergency can be a lifesaver."

For more information on pedestrian and vehicle safety, visit <https://safety.army.mil>.