For Your Driving

ISRI Safety
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Driving Large Vehicles

Following Distance

How closely can you follow the vehicle in front of you and still be safe? The answer depends on road, traffic and weather conditions—and on the size of your vehicle.

Large Vehicles Need More Time to Stop

Ordinary cars on good roads need to allow at least three seconds following time in dry, daytime conditions. The time should be increased at night, in heavy traffic or in bad weather. But large vehicles need to start out with more following time—at least four seconds—even under perfect conditions. Here's why.

It's a Matter of Momentum

A vehicle's stopping distance is simply the distance the vehicle travels before it comes to a full stop. It's a combination of the driver's reaction distance and the vehicle's braking distance. While a driver's reaction distance is the same no matter what size the vehicle is, the braking distance depends on the size of the vehicle. The bigger the vehicle, the more momentum it carries, and the harder it is to stop. The greater stopping distance of a large vehicle translates into a need for greater following time in which to stop.

Allow one second for each 10 feet of vehicle length, plus one second if you're traveling over 40 miles per hour. For example, a 50-foot vehicle going 65mph should allow 6 seconds.

When the Going Gets Tough

Under adverse conditions, add extra time. Add one second each for such conditions as rain, snow, darkness and heavy traffic. Thus, a safe following time for you at night in the fog may be six seconds or more.

Safety Takes Practice

Until you get used to driving with an increased following time, check yourself from time to time. Start counting seconds when the vehicle in front of you passes a landmark such as a telephone pole or milepost. How far did you count? Remember, allow at least four seconds under ideal conditions, more if road or weather aren't perfect.