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Learning to drive



The more you do something, the better you get. This is true in everything people do. Whether it's sport, music, work, or anything else - practice and experience lead to better skills.

Research shows that new solo drivers with about 120 hours of learner driver experience have a crash risk that is 30% lower than new drivers with only about 50 hours of experience. This is why the minimum requirement for young learners in Victoria is 120 hours of driving experience.

It will take many years of driving experience, however, to develop the skills needed to drive safely.

It's not enough just to practice. Skilled sports people and musicians plan and structure their practice and they make sure they practice the key skills that will enable them to perform at a high level. For learner drivers this means you should plan your practice and experience by using information in the **Learner Kit**, and you should focus on practising the safe driving skills that will make you a safer driver.

Hazard perception

Anticipating potential hazards and risky situations is known as **hazard perception**. You will only develop good hazard perception skills if you have lots of driving practice in many different driving situations.

Definition

Hazard perception is the ability to:

- identify possible risks or dangers around you
- assess the level of risk and predict what might happen
- respond in a way and in time to avoid or deal with these potential hazards.

Hazard perception is not the same as reaction time. Young drivers usually have good reaction times but poor hazard perception skills. Reaction time is important – but your ability to anticipate potential hazards is much more important.

Potential hazards can be the vehicles around you, such as:

- the cars in front, behind and beside you
- the motorcycle in the side street to your left
- the truck double-parked up ahead
- the train that will cross the road you're driving on.

Pedestrians and cyclists can also present potential hazards.

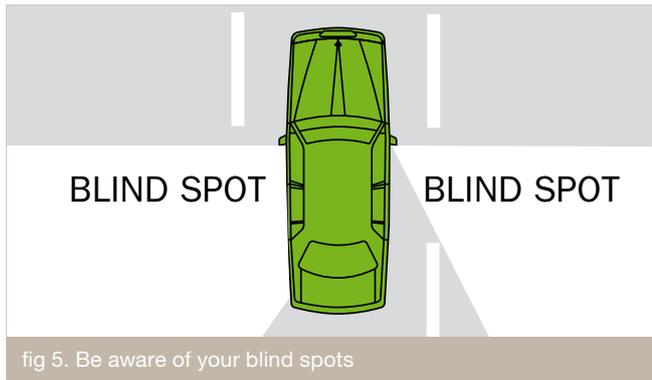
Other hazards include:

- weather conditions
- potholes in the road
- traffic conditions
- the tightness of a curve ahead
- over a hill where you can't see what is on the other side.

Hazards can be anything in the road environment that could present a danger or a risk while driving. New drivers often don't see or anticipate the potential hazards around them, or see them too late.

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Potential hazards can be anywhere, so you can't rely on just looking ahead and using your mirrors. There are blind spots around your car regardless of how well you set up your rear view mirrors. These are areas behind the driver that can't be seen using only mirrors, such as outside the rear door on the driver's side.



You can only see in these blind spots by moving your head and quickly looking over your shoulder – this is called a **head check** (see head check definition, page 34). Do this as well as using mirrors to make sure you see everything around you when reversing, changing lanes, merging or pulling out to overtake.

Definition

To **scan** means taking in the road scene around you by looking ahead, to the sides and in rear view mirrors.

As a driver, knowing exactly what is happening around you at all times is essential. Learn to constantly **scan** and you will be in a better position to anticipate hazards and respond in the best way.

Tip

You will need to do head checks and use your mirrors to check for hazards around your car.

Adjust your mirrors after you have positioned the driver's seat so that you can see clearly. When adjusted correctly there will be an overlap between the view from your outside and inside mirrors.

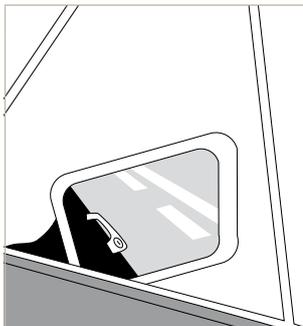


fig 6.

Adjust your outside mirrors so that they just catch a view of the edge of the car. In some cars, a good guide is to be able to see the rear door handle in the bottom corner of the side mirror.

Practice is the best way

Every driving practice session helps.

- Your performance will get smoother.
- You will make better decisions.
- You will get better at anticipating what might happen around you.

The right structure for your practice will help you make sure you are ready to drive solo by the time you go for your probationary licence test.

The **Learner Kit** has a four stage plan for learning to drive. This is the best way to make sure you get the right sort of practice all through the learner period. You will get the **Learner Kit** when you obtain your learner permit.

Check out the online resource, **Lessons from the Road**, for supervising drivers. It is designed to help supervising drivers support their learner driver. It features an online mentor who guides the viewer through eight short videos with tips and advice about the supervisor's role. You may also find it worthwhile, as it will help you to assist your parent(s) to step into the role of your supervisor. Visit vicroads.vic.gov.au.

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The four stages in the **Learner Kit** are:

- **Stage 1** is all about controlling your car. It is the shortest stage, and aims to get you to start, stop and steer safely in a quiet area without traffic.
- **Stage 2** is about applying your new car-control skills and looking out for other road users on quiet roads with little traffic.
- **Stage 3** takes longer and uses your Stage 1 and 2 skills on busier roads and in more difficult driving situations. You learn to deal with traffic and other hazards to become safe in varied driving situations.
- **Stage 4** can be the longest stage. It involves driving as if you are a solo driver. You still have your Ls on the car and a supervising driver beside you, but you'll make most of the driving decisions yourself. The aim is to build up lots of different experiences where you act like a solo driver. Then when you drive on the road on your own you'll be ready to make the right decisions.

The **Guide for Learners** and the **Guide for Supervising Drivers** contain detailed advice about what you and your supervising driver need to do in each of these four stages. They also include checklists and information about how to know when you are ready to move from one stage to the next one.



Your supervising driver is there to help

Driving takes much more effort in the beginning, when you are learning – that is why you have your supervising driver beside you. They don't take the place of professional driving instructors, but supervising drivers such as your parents can provide the extensive practice opportunities you need. They are there to help you:

- with an extra pair of eyes to watch the road
- with some decisions
- as an early warning system – to help anticipate potential hazards.

You will need a close partnership with your supervising driver to make sure you have plenty of opportunities to practice. You can help your supervising driver by making sure they read the **Guide for Supervising Drivers** that you will get as part of the **Learner Kit** when you pass the learner permit test.

You and your supervising driver will have to work together to:

- plan driving sessions using the four stage plan
- keep track of your progress
- keep your **Learner Log Book** up to date and signed
- decide when you are ready to move to the next stage
- keep motivated to keep practising all the way through the learner period.

The role of your supervising driver will gradually change as you progress through the four stages of learning to drive. You will take more responsibility for your driving and your supervising driver will do less.

Don't forget to tell your supervising driver about **Lessons from the Road**, the online resource for supervising drivers at **vicroads.vic.gov.au**. This will help them in their coaching role as your supervising driver.

Learning to drive

Put variety into your driving practice

Over the learner period, you need to practise driving in a broad range of different conditions, such as at night, in wet weather, peak and off-peak traffic, on roads with different speed zones and on sealed and gravel roads. You need to get this broad driving experience while you have the support of your supervising driver.

Tip

You don't want to attempt to drive in difficult situations for the first time when you're a probationary driver without the help of a supervising driver.

Use the **Learner Kit** to help you decide what sort of driving you should be doing. You will get a broad range of driving experiences if you build your learner period around the four stages in the **Learner Kit**.

You should use the information you record in your **Learner Log Book** to keep track of your hours and type of practice, and the **Guide for Learners** can help you decide when you should start practising in different road types and driving conditions.

You will be a safer driver if you have lots of different experiences as a learner, and you will have less trouble passing the Drive Test.

Take every opportunity to practise for 10, 20, 30 minutes, or an hour. Frequent short drives are far more valuable than a few long drives. At the start of the learner period, shorter more frequent practice sessions are more productive and less stressful for both the learner and the supervising driver.

In Stage 4 you can offer to drive for everyday activities such as going to the shops, schools or other family activities. Becoming the family chauffeur is an easy way to increase your regular driving practice.

Getting confident

As you progress with practice you may think you are picking things up quickly.

Practice will build your confidence as a safe driver and this is a good thing. But don't become overconfident!

You will see early signs of improvement in your driving – this tends to be mainly in controlling the car. What may have seemed difficult or impossible the very first time – such as just turning left – seems simple after a few lessons or a few hours behind the wheel.

This can be misleading. There is more to driving than just car control. There are many skills you need to develop to be a safer driver. You can only develop most of these skills if you have as much practice as possible in many different driving situations. The main skills are:

- **Car control:** This includes steering, braking, using pedals, buttons and other controls. These skills usually come quickly, but there is much more to safe driving.
- **Visual scanning:** New drivers tend to look mostly to the front of the car, and not very far ahead of themselves. As you get more experience you will find it easier to scan to the sides of the car, to use your mirrors and scan further ahead. Experience will help you develop a good awareness of what's happening all around you.
- **Identifying and responding to risks:** You need to have a lot of driving experience before you can identify risks or potential hazards. Your experience in many different driving situations helps you learn how to recognise a potential hazard and respond to risky situations – your experience is the best teacher. You will be able to draw on your experience to respond quickly to potential hazards.
- **Making decisions:** Drivers have to make many quick decisions while driving, such as deciding when to slow down and by how much, when to accelerate, what speed is best for different conditions, when to change lanes or overtake. New drivers have to think about these decisions and cannot make them as quickly as experienced drivers. Lots of experience in different driving situations helps you to make many driving decisions more quickly – giving you more time to concentrate on safe driving.

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Tip

If your brakes fail:

- pump on the brake pedal hard and fast
- apply the handbrake carefully so the vehicle doesn't skid
- if possible, change to a lower gear (even in an automatic vehicle) and use your horn to alert other drivers
- try to steer the vehicle so that you avoid a severe collision.

Checking your progress

The **Learner Kit** tells you the best way to check on your progress. It has checklists for each stage of driving that you and your supervising driver can use to decide when you are ready to move onto the next stage.

You will notice that your driving improves in some important areas:

- As you become more experienced you will find your driving changes from clunky and jerky to smooth and fluid movements. Your speed control will shift from 'on or off' to 'ease on and ease off'.
- You will notice over time that your driving becomes much more consistent. You will make fewer and fewer mistakes like wandering in your lane.
- You will get better at low speed actions like reversing the car in a driveway and driving into and out of angled parking bays.
- You will get better at anticipating potential hazards and your supervising driver will not have to point things out to you as often.
- You will rely less on advice and suggestions from your supervising driver.

Your aim should be to drive without relying on your supervising driver, long before you sit the Drive Test. This is why Stage 4 in the **Learner Kit** is important. It focuses on taking full responsibility for driving in many different situations. You will not be ready to sit the probationary licence test until you have ticked off the items in the Stage 4 checklist and when you can drive without relying on your supervisor. This may take more than 120 hours.

Tip

Use the checklists in the **Guide for Learners** and the **Guide for Supervising Drivers** as a helpful way to monitor how you are going. The more practice you do before driving solo the better prepared and safer you will be.

Of course you will still keep learning while driving solo but make the most of your time as a learner driver!

Also make sure you check **Lessons from the Road** at vicroads.vic.gov.au.

