

How close is too close?

Did you realize that following too closely is the leading cause of loss frequency for the average pest control operator? These incidents happen more often than claims for wood damaging insects! Rear-end collisions are one of the most costly types of motor vehicle accidents. In fact, rear-end collisions account for one-third to one-half of total auto insurance losses. These claims typically are for bodily injuries (in neck, back or other soft tissue) to the occupants in the vehicle that was hit.

When a vehicle strikes another from the rear, these incidents are very hard to defend since the law assumes you were at fault for following too closely and in many cases police officers write citations to the rear most vehicle.

Causes of rear-end collisions

The most frequent cause of rear-end collisions is simply one driver following too closely behind the car in front of him. Another cause of rear-end collisions is driver distraction. This includes talking on the phone, doing paperwork and adjusting audio controls. Drivers should avoid using a cell phone while driving. Many safety-conscious fleets do not allow the use of a cell phone while the vehicle is in motion. Paperwork never should be attempted while operating a vehicle.

Two seconds and counting

Many drivers mistakenly think that a following-distance of one or two car-lengths is adequate. At highway speeds, however, a following distance of two car-lengths offers less than one second between your vehicle and the car ahead. This simply is not enough time for anyone to assess the situation, apply the brakes and actually slow or stop the car. Consider how often you see a line of cars driving on the highway at 70 miles per hour, each just a few feet from the vehicle ahead? All of these people are at risk of a rear-end collision. Ironically, they could dramatically reduce their risk and significantly improve their safety margin by merely backing off one or two seconds. Count to two, and then consider if that short amount of time is really worth the added risk of tailgating the vehicle ahead of you? While two seconds won't make a difference in the arrival to your destination, it can greatly reduce your chance of being in a serious collision.

What is a safe following distance?

"The timed interval approach" is a simple rule to keep in mind when following other vehicles, at any speed. To determine the safe following distance under good driving conditions for any vehicle, simply multiply every 10 feet of vehicle length (rounded up) by one second. A typical truck is 20 feet long, 2 times 1 second equals 2 seconds.

For inclement weather or night driving, just add one or two seconds.

Heavily loaded trucks or vans, such as service body type trucks with tools, or chemicals, often require additional stopping distance as well, so add 1 to 2 seconds to the formula for the heavier load.

For example, the safe following distance under good driving conditions is two seconds plus one or two additional seconds for night driving and/or inclement weather. For a 40-foot straight truck, that would be a minimum of four seconds. For a tractor-trailer unit, six seconds is a safe distance in good weather during the day.

Prepared by James Pippin, Jr. CSP; Loss Control Specialist with Fireman's Fund Insurance.