

Safety Tips, No. 8
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MERGING

Merging into another lane or path of travel can present some challenges. Let's focus first on entering a highway from an entrance ramp.

Let's say there is a vehicle ahead of you on the ramp. A couple of things could go wrong here. You know you should make a head-check to see if you have space to enter the highway. But while you are making the head-check, the vehicle ahead of you slows down abruptly! When you turn your head to look forward you are presented with the rear end of a slowing or stopping car, and just when you are accelerating. Yikes! What if you notice it in time and are able to slow down or stop in order to avoid rear-ending the other vehicle, but there is a vehicle behind you that is caught completely off-guard?

How about this one: the vehicle ahead of you is not accelerating as fast as you would like in order for you to get on the highway in the timeline you have in mind. Should you go around that vehicle by moving more than one lane over? If you choose to do this, what if the slower-moving vehicle ahead of you is not content with being in the nearest lane, and moves over two (or more) lanes, into the one you wanted?

And this one: a vehicle behind you decides to overtake you on the entrance ramp. Or, the vehicle behind you decides to cross several lanes of traffic and immediately get into the fast lane, directly from the entrance ramp, which limits your choices on how to enter the new roadway.

And, finally, how does all this maneuvering affect the traffic that's already on the road onto which you are trying to merge?

Have you ever tried to merge into a lane at the exact same time that a vehicle from a farther lane is trying to merge into it?

These are several examples of things that can go wrong when merging into a different lane. Each situation may require a different course of action, but here are some general guidelines:

- Keep your head and eyes up, and be aware of all you can take in. Prioritize the potential consequences of all possibilities with negative outcomes, and act accordingly.
- Give yourself lots of following distance so you can more easily deal with unexpected behavior of the vehicle ahead of you. An added benefit of this approach is that if you can make a smooth and graceful move to avoid a problem up ahead, a vehicle behind you will not have to act as abruptly either.
- Make your path of travel closer to a potential escape route, so you are less likely to get sandwiched between the vehicle ahead and the vehicle approaching from behind.
- Plan to change only one lane at a time. Be patient.
- Use your turn signals far in advance of changing your path of travel, giving other drivers a clue to your intentions.
- Make head-checks. Your mirrors don't tell the whole story. Make the head-checks quickly; the situation up ahead can change fast.
- Remember that another vehicle may be making a move for the place in the next lane that you are intending to take. It may not even be using its turn signal.