

November 2007 - Fall Safety

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Fall is here, and with it come rain and cooler temperatures. Here are a few ways to keep yourself safer this season - and avoid meeting the fire department in its professional capacity - starting with your car.

First, be sure you can see and be seen. Check and replace your headlights and wiper blades if needed, then clean your windshield inside and out. Always turn on your headlights when your wipers are in use, even during daylight. It's the law in California, and it's smart. You may see just fine, but can the driver of that SUV with dirty, rain spattered, side windows see your car before he changes lanes into you? He's got a much better chance if your headlights are on.

Good tire condition is critical in wet weather driving. Regularly check your tires for proper inflation and be sure they still have enough tread. Use a new penny to check the tread depth. If you can see the top of Lincoln's head when the penny is inserted into the tread, the tires probably need replacing. If your vehicle hasn't been to a mechanic in a while have the brakes checked too.

While driving in the rain remember these rules taken from the California Driver Handbook. Most importantly and for obvious reasons, slow down and leave more following room. The three second (or more) rule really applies here, even in rush hour traffic on 17. If you need to slow for a turn, apply the brakes before entering the turn, then coast through it. Braking during the turn itself - particularly on a wet roadway - can cause you to lose traction and skid. And if you don't remember how to steer with a skid or what to do when your car hydroplanes, it's important to remind yourself. Review your owner's manual. Does your car have anti-lock brakes? That changes if (or how) you apply the brakes in these situations. If it happens, ease off the gas, gently steer in the direction you want the car to go, and apply the brakes as your owner's manual recommends.

There are several safety related things you can do around your home, too. First, get your chimney cleaned before you use it. Chimney fires can usually be avoided by having the chimney cleaned. Consider having your furnace serviced. Regular servicing can find and fix problems. It also keeps your heater's efficiency up and thus your propane and/or electric bills down. Next, check your fire extinguisher and the batteries in your smoke detectors. These items save lives, so make sure you've got them in good working order. Consider installing a carbon monoxide alarm if you use propane or a wood stove for heating, as your windows will be closed and CO is a toxic, odorless, colorless gas that can result from combustion.

During our inevitable power outages, keep well away from - and never touch or move - downed power lines. The rule of thumb is twice the distance between poles is far enough away. Any downed power line may be unsafe, so call 911 and report them. While the power is out - and

any other times you use them - be careful with candles. Many fires are started each year by candles left unattended, with children, or knocked over by pets.

Lastly remember that backyard burn season doesn't start in Santa Cruz county until Dec 1, regardless of how much rain we've had, and there is no backyard burning allowed in Santa Clara county at all. A future column will discuss the backyard burn regulations in depth.

There are many resources for these safety tips on the Internet. Use your favorite search engine to look for "wet weather driving safety" or "carbon monoxide detector" and you'll learn a lot.

Keep safe!