

PROTECTING YOURSELF, WHEN TRAVELLING ALONE

FIRST OF ALL, MINIMIZE ANY DANGER AND BE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOURSELF.

STAY AWARE OF WHAT'S HAPPENING AROUND YOU AT ALL TIMES.

Breakdown protection: Perhaps the first thing on your planning list is breakdown protection. *Become a member of a road assistance club, like C.A.A. Being able to call for help is essential if a problem arises. *Check whether your insurance company has an emergency assistance number; you might already have breakdown cover as part of your policy and haven't realised! *Carry your breakdown emergency membership card with you and keep a list of emergency phone numbers in your vehicles glove box or programmed into your phone. *Don't leave your car after dark unless you absolutely must. *If your doors don't automatically lock, lock them when you're in the car. *Lock them when you're out of the car. Don't leave your car unlocked even for a moment. *Set your interior lights to come on when you unlock your car, this will let you see in before you get in. *Keep your valuables off the front seat and hide them, preferably in the trunk. Tinted windows can help minimise someone being able to see what is in the vehicle *Always carry a cellphone and a car charger, but don't talk on your phone, *If someone is following you, exit at a police or fire station (they're marked on main highways) or another well-lit, busy venue. *Stick to major routes. This isn't the time to discover little-used back roads. *If you have a night class or work at a mall, pay attention to where you're parking during the day, after dark, that lot will look far different. Consider the lighting around where you park, and will it be enough to make your vehicle visible when you return. *If you feel in danger or have car problems, call for help and stay in your car. You have a phone, you have roadside assistance, so don't get out for anyone who can't identify themselves as someone you've called, or the police. *Don't walk across a dark parking lot while texting. Just don't. *Some of the best tips are still the most basic: a topped-up fuel tank, a tuned car, a proper map, someone knowing where you're going and someone expecting you on the other end.

Tips for staying safe when driving alone, *Special to The Globe and Mail.*

International Association of Chiefs of Police President Ron Ruecker says most crimes involving women drivers occur when they are heading to or away from their cars, particularly in parking lots, where thieves are tempted to steal both cars and property.

1. Be careful where you park. Safety experts recommend finding a well-lit spot or lot, whether it's indoors or out. Avoid spots where few other vehicles are parked. Steer clear of vans, especially commercial models that lack glass side panels, where wrongdoers can hide. Lock your car and memorize its location. Parking lots with attendants are less likely to play host to criminals. Also consider letting the attendant or mall security know where you're parked as you return to your car or ask security to walk you to your vehicle.

Park away from trees and shrubbery and areas where someone can hide or lurk behind. When you park in a multi story lot, use the ground floor if possible, always face out for an easier or quick get-away. If you need help walking to your vehicle, maybe ask security for assistance.

If you find your vehicle has been tampered with (flat tire) go back immediately to a safe place and call for help. If working late and it's dark in the parking lot, ask a colleague to walk with you to your car. Get someone to walk with you if your car is in a 'quiet' place (you can then give them a lift back) or drive you to where your vehicle is parked and stay until you leave.

2. Have your keys handy. Fumbling for keys in a handbag can give a criminal the extra few seconds he needs to pull off a mugging, abduction, or carjacking, hold them like a weapon for safety. If your key fob can be programmed to open only the driver-side door, do it. Make sure the car is locked once you are in.

3. Pay attention to vehicles near yours. As you head back to your vehicle, is someone sitting in another vehicle's passenger side, next to where you'll be getting in? Is the vehicle pulling out, or just idling? If it's the latter, back off. This could be trouble.

4. Avoid playing Good Samaritan. This is especially true if you're waved down by a lone man in a remote location whose car seems to have broken down. Use your cell phone to call his location in to the highway patrol or police. They can help him out. Most 911 operators can also connect you quickly to a non-emergency line.

5. Think twice about pulling over for an unmarked police car. If you don't think you've done anything wrong or think the "officer" looks suspicious, call 911 and ask for the local police authority. They should be able to tell you whether unmarked cars are patrolling your area. If you're still not sure, turn on your dome light and wave to acknowledge that you see them. Then drive slowly to a well-lit, populated area — a gas station or convenience store, for example — before pulling to a stop. Don't leave your car or roll down the window. Make the officer show his official identification card. Don't settle for a badge or an official-looking hat — they're easy to find. And make sure he's in uniform and that the uniform parts match. Police departments use unmarked cars but rarely staff them with plainclothes officers for traffic patrols.

6. Know where you're going always. Note highway exits, so you can tell someone where you are if you have to. Have directions handy whenever you're going somewhere new. Consider keeping a GPS device in your car if it doesn't have a navigation system. The device will allow you to be tracked and to call in your precise location if you become lost or just aren't good at reading maps. Know your location at all times

7. Keep your vehicle well serviced. A poorly maintained engine can let you down at exactly the wrong time — or place. The same goes for batteries that haven't been charged recently or tested in cold weather. Tires that are long in the tooth and short in the tread can go flat just when they're needed most. Keep your gas tank filled and be careful when refueling, pay attention to those around you, lock your vehicle when you go inside service station to pay for you gas. Maintaining your vehicle can go a long way toward avoiding a bad situation

8. Use all your car's safety and security features. Read the manual — you may not even know how your car can help protect you. For example, run-flat tires can go up to 150 miles if they spring a leak.

Telematics systems let you call an operator at the first sign of trouble and can be used to pinpoint your location. They also alert police and medical authorities if you are in a serious crash. When you're buying a new car, factor both vehicle safety and personal security options into your decision.

9. Have a plan when trouble arises. If confronted by a potential abductor or carjacker while you're in or around your car, drop your packages and run, while making lots of noise. Experts say most criminals will quit right there. What you want to avoid at all costs is going with them to another location, even if they say you won't be hurt. Once you no longer control the situation, you have few options. If you're being followed by another car, head to a police station (call 911 for information on how to get there) or a gas station. If you are driving and discover someone hiding in your backseat, slam on your brakes to throw them off balance, put the car in park and run. Tilting the front passenger seat forward can sometime prevent this happening. If you do break-down stay in the car, lock the doors, and keep your head. You are safer in your car than anywhere else. If there are passing drivers, draw attention to yourself with your headlights, hazards, and horn - keep your engine running.

10. Always let someone know where you're going. Plan and plot your trip on a map, mark off overnight stops and times you plan to check in by telephone and gave it to a friend, family member. The authorities recommend that kind of caution for far shorter trips when women are driving alone. The back-up person can alert police quickly if you fail to return on schedule, saving critical time — and perhaps your life.

*Always Let family members or Business associates know where you are going and when you should return.