

# Celebrate Wellness!

## Auto Accidents

Americans experience approximately 5.4 million motor vehicle crashes every year.<sup>i</sup> These crashes result in 350,000+ annual injuries and annual costs (lost time from work, medical bills, property damage) exceeding \$205 billion. <sup>ii</sup> Here are some tips to stack the odds in your favor, courtesy of the Virginia Chiropractic Association.

The best way to avoid motor-vehicle induced injury is to address the most common risks. Driver inattention tops the list. You can't control other drivers, but you do have a say regarding your own driving habits. Cell phones, sound systems, your on-the-go meal, and a million other distractions threaten your reaction time. Make a commitment to good choices, and you might save yourself quite a bit of pain and suffering.

Excessive use of the triceps surae muscles are another major cause of accidents and injuries. This muscle group, also known as the calf muscles, point the toes downward. Relax these muscles in your right calf, and your vehicle will get slower. Why? Because these muscles control the gas pedal foot. Not only will reduced speeds allow for greater reaction times, but also you may find that your fuel economy improves. There's certainly no harm in protecting your car, your body, and your wallet at the same time.

Here are a few more keys:

- **Defensive driving.** Always properly adjust and use your mirrors, obtain visual confirmation before changing lanes (shoulder checks), and maintain proper distance relationships when following a vehicle or changing lanes. Adjust your driving for road or weather conditions. And remember: we all have stresses, but aggressive behavior on the road certainly isn't the answer. Drive defensively, and save your aggression for the racquetball court.
- **Maintain your vehicle.** Worn or improperly inflated tires can seriously impact your vehicle's responsiveness when it's most needed. Also, get your brakes checked periodically. If they squeak or squeal, attending to them may not only save you an accident, but also may help keep a simple brake pad replacement from turning into a large bill for new rotors.
- **Hang up the keys when taking alcohol or drugs.** Alcohol, even in moderation, impairs your ability to drive. Whether or not you're over the legal limit, you can't afford slowed reaction times and diminished judgment. The same goes for many drugs whether recreational, over-the-counter, or prescription.

If you are in a motor vehicle accident, a number of factors will affect how severely you and your passengers will be injured. Airbags reduce mortality in head-on collisions, and seat belts also save lives; but used in conjunction, they're even more effective. <sup>iii</sup> Be sure children are seated in a manner that's age-appropriate for them. Adults should use both the lap and shoulder belts to avoid potentially damaging torque (twisting) of the upper body and excessive impact with the car's interior, glass, or objects outside the vehicle (ejection from the vehicle).

Gender isn't something we can easily change, though female gender (and likely, the corresponding tendency of women to have less muscle mass) seems to contribute to whiplash risk in rear-end collisions. One thing you can do: If possible, don't turn your head at the moment of impact. A turned head, such as looking in a mirror as a rear-impact strikes, will increase the risk of neck (cervical), upper back injuries, and headaches.

If you are in a motor vehicle accident, be sure to do a quick assessment of the situation. If there's a high risk of explosion or the vehicle is otherwise unsafe, occupants must exit immediately; but be aware that a serious cervical (neck) injury could easily cause paralysis or death if a victim is moved without professional stabilization of the injured part. Allow the professionals to do their part. As soon as possible, even if you feel fine, get a thorough evaluation. A doctor of chiropractic is extensively trained in diagnosis and treatment of injuries to the human frame. Early intervention may help

minimize the risk of a lifetime of headaches, neck and back pain, disc degeneration, premature arthritis, and nagging annoyances that can seriously impact quality of life.

*i National Highway Transportation Safety Administration report, as reported at <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/airbags/EconomicBurden/pages/WhatDoTCCost.html>. <sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>iii</sup> *American Journal of Epidemiology* 2001, Vol. 153, No. 3 : 219-224.*



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