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BE PREPARED

When you drive a vehicle, you have a responsibility to yourself, your family, your organization, and other drivers on the road to do everything you reasonably can to avoid contributing to a collision or any other kind of accident.

There are more than 100 million licensed drivers in the United States. They aren't all driving around on our local roads, but the ones who are seem to be like the rest. Most try to drive safely and obey the rules. But too many never learn the rules of the road very well, or don't have much experience, or have dangerous driving habits. Some may be under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Some may simply be confused about where they are going and how to get there. Some are driving poorly maintained vehicles.

The trouble is all those people are sharing the road with you, and some might do things that could cause an accident for you. That means you must be aware of what those other drivers are doing, must spot the dangerous situation as it develops, and must be prepared to react immediately to avoid being in an accident.

You must always be alert, paying attention to the road situation, and ready to react. You can't afford to be thinking of other things, and not paying attention to what you are doing and to what all those other drivers are doing.

You can't trust other drivers to do what they should. Don't depend on the alertness or the driving skills of any other driver, and don't expect them to have common sense. You should expect that they will not behave or respond the way they ought to. In other words, expect the unexpected. You can't control them, so you should be always ready to react to someone else's reckless, illegal, thoughtless, or unskilled actions.

One thing you can try to do is always to maintain enough distance from the vehicle in front of you so that you will see situations develop, and take whatever action you need to take. The more room you have between you and other vehicles, the more time you will have to see what you need to see, think of what you need to think of, and do what you need to do.

Remember that your most important defense against an accident is to keep yourself in good driving condition. Keep in mind that there are some things that may affect your driving ability by reducing your ability to see what is happening, to think clearly about

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it, and to react, to do what you need to do quickly. For example:

- Alcohol affects your judgment, reaction time, and coordination. It stimulates at first, but then it depresses your mental and body functions.
- Other drugs have similar effects, distorting our perception of things, our judgment, and our reactions.
- Even prescription medications may affect your driving. If you are taking prescription medicine, ask the doctor or pharmacist how it might affect your driving. And if you buy "over the counter" drugs, read the labels carefully for warnings.
- Don't drive at all when you are tired. Get the rest you need, so you will be alert when you drive. When you are tired, pull off the road to get a little bit of exercise and fresh air, before continuing.
- When you feel angry, frustrated, or worried, or even if you are very happy and excited about something, those emotions may take your mind off your driving. Before you get behind the wheel, calm yourself down and get your emotions under control. When someone else cuts you off in traffic or does something else foolish and dangerous, remember -- you are a better driver than that. Don't do anything to get back at them.
- Heat may make you drowsy while you drive. Turn down the heater, or use an air conditioner if you have it, open windows to get some breeze, or stop and stretch.
- A steady rain, the movement of windshield wipers, and too much light are all things that can make us drowsy or less alert. Wear sunglasses to cut down glare. Play the radio to change the sounds you are hearing or overcome the monotony of rain. And don't let yourself get hypnotized by the movement of windshield wipers. Change their speed, stop the vehicle for a while and close your eyes, or find other ways to get rid of that steady movement in front of your eyes.