

Safety tips for motorway drivers at start of breakdown season

New data from the company shows more than 48,500 motorway breakdowns happened over the summer holiday period, between the final week of June and the first weekend of September last year.

Highways England is expecting to respond to an extra 700 breakdowns a week for the next 10 weeks, taking the average number of motorway breakdowns each week to almost 5,000.

The first weekend in August was the busiest weekend for breakdowns on England's motorways in 2018 shortly followed by the final weekend in July, with one breakdown reported every two minutes as drivers set off on day trips and holidays.

Highways England, which is responsible for running England's motorways and major A road network, today launched a new safety campaign encouraging drivers to remember the basics of motorway driving, including what to do if you break down.

Adverts on radio, billboards and online will remind drivers of simple driving rules to help keep everyone moving.

Richard Leonard, head of road safety at Highways England, said:

We want everyone to get to their destination safely and we can all play a part in that.

Highways England has done a lot of work to ease congestion on our motorways and make them safer, and our traffic officers are there to help get things moving if there's a problem. But you should also make sure you know what to do if your vehicle does break down.

We're expecting to see a big increase in breakdowns over the next few weeks as drivers set out on longer journeys during the summer. So, we're urging drivers to remember the basics of motorway driving, including carrying out simple vehicle checks before setting off, to help keep us all moving.

Around a quarter of summer breakdowns are caused by punctures or other tyre issues. Vehicles running out of fuel and engines overheating are also other common reasons for breakdowns on motorways.

Highways England is advising drivers that regular car checks help avoid breakdowns:

- check tyres: prior to setting off on a long/significant journey, check

- your tyre pressures are suitable for the load and the condition of your tyres, including the spare. Look out for cuts or wear and make sure the tyres have a minimum tread depth of 1.6mm, which is the legal limit
- check engine oil: use your dipstick to check oil regularly and before any long journey, and top up if needed. Take your car back to the garage if you're topping up more than usual
 - check water: to ensure you have good visibility, always keep your screen wash topped up so you can clear debris or dirt off your windscreen
 - check lights: if your indicators, hazard lights, headlights, fog lights, reverse lights or brake lights are not functioning properly, you are putting yourself and your family at risk. In addition, light malfunctions can be a reason for your vehicle to fail its MoT
 - check fuel: before setting out, check your fuel levels and make sure you have enough to get to your destination

More advice can be found online on the [vehicle safety checks webpage](#).

Highways England has also issued five basic safety tips to follow if your car does break down on a motorway:

- get away from the traffic: exit the motorway or get to an emergency area or hard shoulder and use the free phone provided
- if that's not possible, move left onto the verge
- get out of the left side of your car and behind the barrier if you can and it is safe to do so
- get help – contact your breakdown provider or Highways England on 0300 123 5000.
- if you break down in moving traffic and cannot leave your car, keep your seatbelt and hazard lights on and call 999

RAC patrol of the year Ben Aldous said:

The summer is always a busy time for us and with more drivers using their vehicles for longer journeys and for extended periods, it is vital they carry out checks before they travel to reduce the chances of a breakdown.

This includes checking oil levels, making sure tyres are properly inflated and have good tread, checking coolant, electrics and making sure they have enough fuel for their journeys.

Safety should always be the priority for drivers – which means obeying road signs, red X signals on motorways, avoiding in-vehicle distractions and taking regular breaks to prevent fatigue on longer journeys.

The new Highways England safety campaign is also encouraging drivers to keep left except when overtaking, to help keep traffic flowing more freely, and to 'follow the signs' to keep everyone moving – that includes red X signs, which are used to close lanes, and variable speed limit signs, which help improve the flow of traffic and tackle stop-start conditions.

Red Xs are displayed on overhead electronic signs to close lanes for several reasons, including an accident or breakdown, debris in the carriageway, or because of a person or animal on the road. Lanes are also closed to help emergency services get through or to provide a safe space for road workers.

Ignoring a red X has been an offence since 1988, with drivers facing a £100 fine and three points on their licence. A new law was introduced earlier this month which will enable enforcement by cameras after all the necessary testing and preparation has been completed.

Edmund King, AA president said:

Keeping safe on the motorway is essential, yet almost one in 10 (7%) say they flout red X signs or do not believe the lower speed limit on display. The signs and messages are on for a reason, and doing as they say will save lives.

As well as checking your vehicle over before your journey, you should also check you have the phone number or app of your breakdown provider should the worst happen and you need assistance.

Cutting out middle lane hogging will also increase capacity and reduce potential road rage.

Neil Greig, IAM RoadSmart Director of Policy and Research, said:

Observation, anticipation and preparation are the key foundations of advanced driving and when it comes to motorway driving preparation is vital. Most major delays on holiday routes are caused by unpredictable incidents such as breakdowns and collisions.

Preparing yourself, your passengers and your car can minimise the risk and help everyone get on with enjoying their break. Taking care of the simple things like ensuring you have enough fuel, your load is safe and your route and stops are planned will leave you relaxed and unstressed to enjoy the drive.

This is where the other two skills of advanced driving take over on your journey with observation of signs and traffic helping you anticipate what is happening ahead and giving you plenty of time to react. Unique skills are required to safely navigate our busy motorway network with special signs such as the red X that must be complied with and understood.

If your motorway driving skills are rusty than an IAM RoadSmart motorway module could give you the confidence boost you need to enjoy a safe and relaxed road trip.

Tips for motorway driving:

- never drive in a lane closed by a red X
- keep to the speed limits shown on the gantries or signs
- a hard shoulder is always identified by a solid white unbroken line – if there's no speed limit displayed above it or a red X is displayed, do not use it except in emergency
- a broken white line indicates a normal running lane
- if the hard shoulder is being used as an extra lane, use the designated emergency areas for emergencies
- if your vehicle experiences difficulties, eg warning light, exit the motorway immediately, if you can safely do so
- most breakdowns are preventable – keep your car well maintained, check your tyres and make sure you have enough fuel for your journey. Don't stop except in an emergency. If you have to stop make sure you know what to do

Please visit our web page for more information about [driving on motorways](#).

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.