

HAZARDS OF DRIVING IN EUROPE

1. General. Driving in Europe can be hazardous. Road conditions can change very quickly, which can be deadly for unsuspecting drivers. Heavy rain, fog, heavy traffic, and sudden stops are conditions that frequently are responsible for Soldier, civilian and family-member deaths and injuries on European roads. All drivers need to be alert and prepared for possible emergency situations to avoid injury to themselves and others. Many times, simply reducing speed will significantly reduce the risks and prevent accidents.

2. Driving Conditions. The following provides information on driving conditions that people can expect when driving in Europe. Recommended precautions also are given for each of these conditions to reduce the potential for accidents. All Soldiers and civilian employees should be briefed on these hazardous driving conditions and precautions before the Memorial Day weekend (28 to 31 May 04).

a. Fog. Fog is the condensation of moisture in the atmosphere near the surface of the earth. This can happen in several ways but always results from the same basic conditions: warm, moist air meeting cold air; or cold, moist air meeting warm air. These conditions occur throughout the year. Fog can form quickly and may reduce visibility to zero. Fog is a major hazard on European highways and contributes to many vehicle accidents each year. Use the following safety tips when fog is expected:

- Consider postponing your trip until the fog clears.
- Slow down before you enter a patch of fog.
- If your vehicle is equipped with fog lamps, turn them on.
- Be sure that you can stop within the distance that you can see.
- Turn on the wipers and defroster to remove moisture from the windshield.
- Use your low-beam headlamps, whether it is day or night.
- Do not use high beams; they reflect off the fog and can reduce visibility.
- Use the right edge of the road or painted road markings as a reference.
- Watch out for slow-moving and parked vehicles.
- Do not change lanes or pass other vehicles unless absolutely necessary.
- If you must pull off the road, signal, and then carefully pull off as far as possible.
- After pulling off the road, turn on your hazard flashers.

b. Rain. Long periods of rain can lead to flooding and standing water on the roads. Even thin layers of water on the road can create dangerous conditions. Heavy rains can reduce a driver's visibility to dangerously short distances and make roadway markings and other traffic difficult to see. Water mixed with roadway dirt and oil can create slick surfaces. Wet brakes can increase stopping distances. Hydroplaning can occur when the tire's tread cannot remove the water from underneath the tire fast enough. The tire begins to ride on top of a ridge of water and loses contact with the ground, which can cause the driver to lose control of the vehicle. The combination of fast speeds and wet European highways results in many hydroplaning accidents each year. Many variables lead to hydroplaning, but slower speeds and good tires are the best ways to prevent it. The following safety tips should be used when driving in wet weather:

- Most important, slow down
- Stay in middle lanes, since water tends to pool in outside lanes.
- Follow vehicles using the 3- (or more) second rule of spacing (AE Pam 190-34).
- Try to follow in the tracks of the vehicle in front of you.
- Avoid hard braking; take your foot off the accelerator to slow down.
- Ensure tires and windshield wipers are in good condition.
- Always drive with your headlights on in wet weather.
- Never drive beyond the limits of visibility.
- Never drive through moving water or puddles that touch the vehicle frame.
- Beware of high winds during storms and blinding lightning at night.

3. Fatigue. Safe driving demands your full attention. Know the symptoms and causes of fatigue and what to do to control it. If you feel your eyelids getting heavy, your next actions may determine not only whether or not you will stay awake; they may determine whether or not you stay alive. Fatigue on the road can be a killer over long weekends and holidays. It happens frequently on long drives, especially long night drives. Traffic density is increased and weather conditions may not be the best. All these factors increase stress and produce fatigue. Signs of fatigue include back tension, burning eyes, shallow breathing, inattentiveness, and erratic driving, such as drifting, abnormal speed, tailgating, or failure to obey traffic signs. The single greatest cause of fatigue is alcohol consumption. Alcohol is a depressant; a driver does not have to be drunk to fall asleep at the wheel. Even one drink can be enough to cause fatigue. The National Safety Council offers these tips for staying awake while driving:

- An obvious cause of fatigue is lack of sleep. If you have not received 7 or 8 hours of sleep the night before a trip, you are likely to experience fatigue. Get enough rest. Do not start a trip late in the day or in the evening. Long-distance driving is hard work and you need to be fresh and alert.
- If possible, do not drive alone. Passengers can take turns driving and help keep you awake.
- Avoid long drives at night. The glare of lights increases the danger of highway hypnosis.
- Adjust your car's environment so that it helps keep you awake and alert. Keep the temperature cool and open windows or use the air conditioner. Turn the radio volume up and switch stations frequently, but avoid soft, sleep-inducing music.
- Do not use cruise control; keep your body involved with the driving. Watch your posture. Drive with your head up and your shoulders back. Tuck your buttocks against the seat back. Legs should not be fully extended, but flexed at about a 45-degree angle. Take frequent breaks. At least every 2 hours, stop at a gas station, restaurant, or rest stop. Get out of the car, walk around, even jog or do calisthenics. In addition to exercise breaks, stop for light meals and snacks. Avoid alcohol entirely.
- Do not allow your eyes to become fatigued or hypnotized. Wear sunglasses to prevent glare, but never wear sunglasses at night.
- Break the monotony. Turn the radio on for a while, then off. Vary speed levels. Chew gum, stretch your legs, talk to yourself, or sing. Keep your eyes moving.
- If anti-fatigue measures fail and you start noticing the danger signs of fatigue, there is only one solution: sleep. Remember, good planning can avoid your having to deal with fatigue and can help ensure a safe trip.