

Safe Driving When Hearing The Emergency Siren

We need to focus on safe driving for road users when emergency vehicles, with lights and sirens activated, are heading towards the scene of an emergency. The drivers of emergency vehicles are mostly well trained in advanced driving and focused on the safety of others. They have no intention or desire to force others off the roads. The everyday road user in return needs to make way for them in a safe manner and not create another emergency by making the wrong moves. We will be sharing information on safe driving in an emergency as well as advice from the experts on how to respond when we hear the sirens of an emergency vehicle.

What are the major threats on the road when acting in emergency response?

Personnel of the emergency services risk their lives daily to help us in our time of need. But are we aware of the threats they encounter on the roads? Sometimes the biggest risk is just getting to the scene of a road crash or other medical emergency!

Emergency vehicles need to travel at high speed safely to reach those in need of medical response. Through unsafe driving we can stand in the way of a life-or-death situation.

The biggest threat is the driver who panics when he hears the sound of a siren.

Many drivers are confused about what to do and either come to a stop abruptly at the wrong place or makes a dangerous move threatening the safety of not only the emergency vehicle, but also other road users.

Some drivers don't give way at all, especially during rush hour.

Many road users, when approaching the scene of an accident are distracted, caus-

ing rubbernecking and dangerous traffic situations.

There are also increased risks at specific locations:

- At hills or blind bends – when drivers stop at a hill or blind bend it puts the emergency vehicle driver in further jeopardy.
- At Hospitals - Fire Stations: When drivers pull over at the entrances of these premises they may hinder one of their emergency vehicles from leaving or safe arrival.
- Stopped or Parked Emergency Vehicle: Where these vehicles are spotted drivers need to slow down and continue with caution giving the emergency vehicle a wide berth. Watch out for obstacles, other drivers, and Rubbernecker's.
- At Road Junctions/Intersections: Vehicles sometimes block these junctions thereby impeding the emergency vehicle
- Road Traffic Legislation/Rules of the Road and sharing the roads

On the Arrive Alive website we find a detailed discussion on the importance of Emergency Response during the "Golden Hour". Precious time lost getting to the scene of a car crash or medical emergency during this time could mean the difference between life-and-death.

with Emergency Vehicles

There is specific legislation governing this in South Africa.

Regulation 308(1)(h) applies.

General duties of driver or passenger of vehicle on public road

Reg 308. (1) No person driving or having a vehicle on a public road shall -

(h) fail to give an immediate and absolute right of way to a vehicle sounding a device or bell or displaying an identification lamp in terms of section 58(3) or 60 or regulation 176;

Many drivers seem to think they can evaluate and judge whether a blue lamp is legitimate before they move out of the way. This is however not a decision to be made by the driver!

Reg 308 makes it an offence if the person does not immediately try to get out of the way regardless if the blue lamp is displayed legitimately.

Note that the Act also talks about a "warning lamp" (ie: flashing lights) which is deemed to be equivalent to a siren, so if you see a police car behind you which has its flashing lights on without a siren, your reaction should be the same as if it was sounding its siren.

In any event, regulation 308 (h) makes it an offence to fail to give "...immediate and absolute right of way..." to a vehicle displaying flashing lights and / or sirens in terms of S58 / 60. However, that doesn't mean you're obliged to crash your car into a barrier or something the moment a siren comes on behind you, because S58 also says that a driver of a vehicle which is showing a warning lamp or sounding a siren is obliged to drive

"...with due regard to the safety of other traffic..."

So basically, the moment you can safely move out of the way, you should do so!

What do we need to avoid doing?

- Before focusing on what to do we need to also consider what we should avoid doing!
- Avoid those driver distractions such as loud music that may prevent you from hearing sirens timeously – keep the noise levels down inside your vehicle.
- When an emergency vehicle approaches, do not panic and overreact.
- Do not disregard the emergency lights & sirens and continue to travel despite the response vehicle.
- Do not slam on your brakes or stop abruptly blocking the road or a junction or stop at a place that doesn't have enough room to pull over.
- Do not stop at places where it will be difficult for the emergency driver to pass – such as a hill or a bend.
- Do not pull to the right or stop in the middle lane when there is room to pull to the left.
- Do not race ahead trying to cross the green traffic light before the emergency vehicle gets there.
- Never drive through a red light or stop sign when an emergency vehicle approaches from behind.
- Do not try to overtake an emergency vehicle displaying flashing lights unless directed to do so by a police officer or emergency personnel.
- Emergency services will use the hard shoulder if all lanes are blocked, so don't drive onto, or block the hard shoulder.
- Keep a following distance and avoid following behind emergency vehicles too closely – it is dangerous and may be illegal!

- Avoid making sudden movements once an emergency vehicle has passed – there may be more response vehicles heading your way!

Safe driving after hearing the sirens: What do we need to do when driving?

- The best advice would be for the driver to do the following:
- Be prepared - look and listen for ambulances, fire engines, police or other emergency vehicles using flashing blue, red or green lights, headlights and sirens.
- Avoid loud noise and other distractions and regularly scan your rear-view mirror.
- Stay calm and make well informed decisions while staying safe and within the rules of safe driving and the law.
- Remain aware of vehicles to your right and left as well as vehicles possibly in your mirrors' blind spots.
- Check your rear-view and side mirrors to estimate the speed of the emergency vehicle and plan your next move.
- Start looking ahead for a safe area where you can pull over.
- If it would be unsafe to bring the vehicle to a safe stop - move forward at a safe speed.
- Confused or nervous drivers that stay in motion, not knowing what to do or where to go, are the drivers that usually collide with other motorists or the emergency vehicle.
- Always signal your intent to emergency vehicles and other road users by using your indicators.
- Pull over to the inside lane if possible and wait for the emergency vehicle to pass.
- Keep a foot on the brake so the brake lights let emergency vehicle drivers know you have stopped.
- Keep in mind there may be more

emergency vehicles heading in the same direction.

- Be prepared in case you may be approaching the scene of a road crash.
- When you see a stopped emergency vehicle, slow down and move over a lane if possible. If traffic or other conditions prevent you from changing lanes, you must slow down and proceed with caution.
- When passing the scene of an accident do not be distracted or slow down unnecessarily - avoid causing another crash.
- When you are at an intersection with a stop sign or red light and a response vehicle is coming up behind you, stay where you are if you cannot pull to the left.
- Anticipate the likely route the driver of the emergency vehicle will take. If you're on a long road with no turnings ahead, it's sensible to assume that the emergency driver wishes to drive straight on and get past you.
- Check to make sure the way is clear and signal before merging gradually into the fast-flowing traffic.

Challenges facing the Emergency Response Teams.

- We decided to approach our road safety partner and emergency response service provider ER24 to gain some insights on the challenges they face daily when responding to emergencies.

We raised the following questions:

Do you believe drivers in SA know what to do when they hear the emergency siren?

In general I do not believe that drivers know what to do when they hear a siren. Also we need to keep in mind that some sirens are not audible at long distances and will definitely not be heard when people have loud music on in their vehicles. The standard requirement is usually a 100 Watt siren system. About a year ago ER24 changed the requirements and installed 2x 150 Watt dual tone sirens in our emergency vehicles in order to make it more audible.

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What do you experience as the biggest mistakes these drivers make when hearing a siren?

The first thing is people panic. They do not always know what to do and do not know where to move. Although it is accepted that you move to the left so the emergency vehicle can pass, it is not always possible and especially in peak traffic vehicles cannot always move over. Generally people also slam on brakes and slow down. This increases the risk of a collision as the emergency vehicle operator is not sure what the motorist's next move is. Try and use your indicator and move as soon as possible so we can plan our route around you.

How do you guard against these dangers – what can the driver of the emergency response vehicle do?

We try and keep a good distance between the vehicles in front and around us. However, if we do not move forward closer to the vehicle, the motorists do not make way. We use our indicators to show the motorist in which lane we try to move into. There is not a lot you can do but wait for a vehicle to move and pass until it is safe to do so.

How do drivers of the emergency response vehicle approach entering an intersection?

Intersections are very dangerous as the majority of collisions involving emergency vehicles occur here. Therefore we would slow down and the rule is to come to a complete stop at a red light before entering the intersection. Turning lanes are the biggest culprits here. People see the light as green and cannot understand why everyone is stationary. They proceed with speed into the turning lane and collide with the emergency vehicle.

The slower you enter an intersection while responding the safer it is. Even a green light should be considered as dangerous as motorist's panic and may make sudden moves into the path of an oncoming ambulance or emergency vehicle.

Where do you as the driver of the emergency response vehicle seek to drive with emergency lights on a multiple lane road?

The best option is the far right hand lane. Should the traffic be gridlocked we try and make use of the emergency lane on the far left hand side. Some highways make it possible to use the shoulder lane on the far

right hand as well. We seldom move in between the vehicles – this usually happens when there is no emergency or shoulder lane or if the emergency vehicle needs to get to an off ramp.

Any advice you might have for drivers when they are approached by emergency vehicles with their lights and sirens?

Pay attention and observe your surroundings. If you are not sure what to do, stay where you are and drive normally. We will move around you. If there is space for you to move left, proceed to do so, if safe. Check your mirrors regularly and start moving over when you notice emergency lights. Do not wait for the vehicle to be right behind you to move over. Do NOT slam on brakes and then move over. Do so in a smooth and controlled manner.

Advice from the Safe Driving Experts

What do our safe driving instructors perceive to be the major risks when sharing the roads with emergency vehicles? We discussed this with Rob-Handfield Jones from Driving.co.za

Do you believe drivers are alert enough in traffic to pay attention to emergency sirens? Have we become too distracted? A siren is fairly intrusive and even a distracted driver should be aware of the change in outside noise. A key issue is when drivers have music playing too loudly in the car and they can't physically hear the sirens.

What are the most common mistakes drivers make when suddenly hearing emergency sirens?

The most common mistake is that they don't hear sirens due to in-vehicle noise / loud music, or that they are not paying attention and do not see the flashing lights (which are equivalent to a siren, as I've already mentioned).

Another mistake drivers make is to brake almost by reflex when a vehicle with flashing lights or sirens approaches from behind. This is bad because it disrupts traffic flow and if you ask anyone who drives an emergency vehicle, they will list it as one of their major annoyances when on a response call.

The third mistake is to try and move out of the way when it's not safe to do so. This could cause a multi-vehicle crash in which an emergency or police vehicle might be involved and means that they cannot assist at the accident or crime scene they are trying to reach.

What would your best advice be to drivers on how to drive when hearing the siren?

- **On a multi-lane road – where do they go?**
Maintain your speed and move out of the way as soon as you can safely do so. Remember you are obliged by law to give way, so don't hog the lane in defiance.
- **At an intersection/traffic light?**
Move as far left (or right) as you can to create space for the vehicle to get by if they are approaching from behind. If the vehicle is crossing the intersection against a red light or clearly intends to disregard a stop street or yield sign, remember that the law empowers it to do so while it is sounding its siren or showing flashing lights, so give way even if the light is green for you, or it's "your turn" to go.

Is there any specific advice to cyclists or pedestrians - what would you advise them to do?

I've long believed that part of school education should include a module on vehicle dynamics so that pedestrians and cyclists can learn what vehicles are capable of and in which direction their momentum will carry them under different conditions. I.e. if a vehicle is skidding, or is involved in a minor crash at an intersection where is it likely to end up, and which way a pedestrian or cyclist should run / ride to get out of the way?

Unfortunately, most pedestrians don't have this knowledge, so they should always walk facing traffic and stay far back from the roadway to avoid conflict with drivers trying to get out of the way of emergency vehicles. Also, they should never walk on freeways. There is a worrying trend of pedestrians encouraging taxis to stop on freeways to allow them to get on or off, but this blocks the emergency lane and could lead to pedestrians being killed.

Conclusion

Let us assist our emergency response personnel to provide help fast and effective. If you had an emergency or a loved one was in peril you would want the emergency services to reach them as quickly as possible!

