



Post-Crash and Disabled Vehicle Mishaps

Initially surviving a vehicle mishap doesn't mean the danger has passed. Recent motor vehicle crash data shows that drivers and passengers remain at significant risk after a collision, rollover or when they pull over to deal with a disabled vehicle. In many reported incidents, the service member had exited their vehicle following a crash or vehicle breakdown and was attempting roadside repairs, assessing vehicle damage or assisting others when they were subsequently struck by oncoming traffic or exposed to additional hazards that resulted in injury or death to the servicemember. These secondary events often occur within minutes of the initial incident and can result in injuries far more severe than those sustained in the original mishap. The decisions made in the moments following a vehicle incident can significantly impact the outcome, making situational awareness, risk management and adherence to basic safety principles critical to preventing further injury or loss of life.



File photo, not associated with a mishap

Danger Doesn't End After the Crash

A service member was a passenger in a vehicle traveling on an interstate during the early morning hours when the driver lost control, causing the vehicle to strike a guardrail and roll over. After the crash, both occupants exited the vehicle and separated, presumably seeking assistance. While attempting to cross the highway in the darkness, the service member was struck by an oncoming vehicle. Emergency responders arrived on scene and pronounced the service member dead. The driver of the striking vehicle reported having insufficient time to see and react to the pedestrian in the road due to nighttime conditions. — *Following a collision, especially on high-speed roads, individuals who leave their vehicles become pedestrians in an extremely hazardous environment. Limited visibility, traffic and impaired driver reaction times can quickly turn a survivable crash into a fatal event. When possible, occupants should move to a safe location away from traffic, remain visible to approaching motorists and avoid crossing active travel lanes. Maintaining situational awareness after a vehicle mishap is just as important as preventing the crash itself.*

Helping Can Be Hazardous

A service member stopped to assist at the scene of a vehicle crash and climbed onto an overturned vehicle to aid the trapped driver. A second vehicle then struck the disabled vehicle, knocking the service member to the ground. Emergency medical services responded and transported the service member to the emergency room for treatment. The Sailor was later released and placed on 72 hours SIQ. — *Helping others after a crash is commendable, but crash scenes can quickly become hazardous environments. Disabled vehicles may remain exposed to traffic, creating the potential for secondary collisions that place both victims and responders at risk. Before rendering aid, individuals should assess the scene for potential hazards and, when possible, position themselves to maximize visibility and minimize exposure to traffic. Situational awareness and scene safety are critical to preventing additional injuries — or worse.*

Stranded on the Shoulder

Two service members were driving at night in rainy conditions through a poorly marked construction zone when they were forced onto the shoulder to avoid colliding with another vehicle merging into their lane. After coming to a stop on the shoulder, their vehicle became stuck in the mud. One service member exited the vehicle and attempted to free it before moving behind the vehicle to retrieve items from the trunk. While the service member was standing behind the disabled vehicle, another traveling vehicle lost traction, left the roadway and struck the rear of the disabled vehicle, pinning the service member between the two vehicles. The other service member immediately rendered first aid and applied tourniquets until emergency responders arrived and took the injured service member to a hospital. — *Once a vehicle becomes disabled, the roadway itself often becomes the greatest hazard. Poor visibility, adverse weather and passing traffic can leave occupants vulnerable to secondary collisions. If exiting the vehicle is necessary, personnel should move well away from traffic and avoid standing near, behind or between vehicles. Maintaining situational awareness after the initial incident is essential to preventing further injury.*

A Flat Tire Turns Fatal

While driving to duty during the early morning hours, a service member pulled onto the shoulder of an interstate to address a flat tire. After getting out of the vehicle to determine the cause of the tire failure, the service member was struck by a passing vehicle that fled the scene. Witnesses reported the striking vehicle was traveling along the shoulder while passing other traffic. The service member died from injuries sustained in the impact. — *What began as a routine roadside stop quickly turned fatal. Even when a vehicle is safely stopped on the shoulder, passing traffic remains an ever-present hazard. Drivers should carefully evaluate their surroundings before exiting a vehicle and avoid spending unnecessary time near active travel lanes. Remaining visible and seeking a safe location away from the roadway can significantly reduce the risk of a secondary collision.*



The Second Impact

A motorcyclist hit another motorcycle during a nighttime ride, causing both riders to be thrown from their bikes. After both riders survived the initial crash, one of the motorcyclists was struck by a passing vehicle in a hit-and-run incident. Emergency responders transported the rider to a medical center with severe injuries. Despite receiving advanced medical care, the rider later succumbed to injuries sustained during the event. Investigators determined the rider was not impaired and was wearing a helmet and most required personal protective equipment at the time of the mishap. — *Secondary collisions often pose a greater threat than the initial crash. After a roadway incident, drivers and riders can become exposed to moving traffic, especially during nighttime conditions when visibility is limited. Being aware of your surroundings and moving to a safe location when possible and treating roadways as active hazards are essential to reducing the risk of further injury.*

Key Takeaways

The initial crash or vehicle breakdown is not always the most dangerous part of a mishap. Drivers, passengers, riders and even bystanders often become vulnerable to serious injury or death after exiting a vehicle or remaining near an active roadway. The moments and decisions made immediately following a crash are critical and can significantly impact the outcome.

- 1. Treat the roadway as an active hazard.** After a crash or vehicle disablement, traffic continues moving around you. Passing vehicles may not see you, may be distracted or may be unable to react due to weather, darkness or road conditions. Always assume additional vehicles could enter your area.
- 2. Move to a safe location whenever possible.** If the vehicle can be safely exited, move well away from traffic lanes, shoulders, medians and disabled vehicles. Avoid standing behind, between or next to vehicles, as secondary collisions frequently occur in these areas.
- 3. Make yourself visible and call for help.** Activate hazard flashers, use reflective devices if available and contact emergency services as soon as possible. If assistance is needed, wait for trained responders to establish a safe scene and avoid crossing active roadways whenever possible.

And remember, “Let’s be careful out there”