

## **STEERING CLEAR; THINGS YOU CAN DO TO AVOID PILEUPS AND WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE IN ONE**

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### **Body**

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#### STEERING CLEAR

STONE PHILLIPS: Burned-out cars, vehicles smashed almost beyond recognition, the aftermath of a pileup, the kind of terrible scene you may have passed on the highway, and barely avoided yourself. But what if you were caught in the multiple collisions of a pileup? Would you know the steps that could help you and your family make it to safety? Here's Keith Morrison with a DATELINE/Discovery Channel Exclusive.

KEITH MORRISON reporting: (Voiceover) It starts with screeching tires and shattering glass, then there's fire and smoke and chaos. It may look like a scene from a Hollywood disaster movie, but a scene like this can be a very real version of hell on Earth.

(Car crash photos)

Mr. MICHAEL ROSE: I thought I was getting ready to die, I thought they were going to hit me and that was going to be all there was to it.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) Yet in a pileup there's more, much more. Car after car slamming together, trapping drivers and passengers in a chain-reaction collision.

(Car crashes; flaming cars)

MORRISON: A pileup is that worst kind of traffic accident that can take many lives in a matter of just seconds. And it happens more often than you might think. There have been 400 major traffic pileups in the US alone in the last couple of decades, reducing cars and trucks to wrecks like you see here. And it's not just an American phenomenon at all.

(Voiceover) In England, a pileup caught in progress. In South Korea, in South Africa. The scenes are eerie and familiar. But now scientists are beginning to untangle the sequence of events, and even some tricks of the mind, that can lead to wreck and ruin. For Michael Rose, the drive into disaster begins on a highway in California's Central Valley, December 11, 1997. A morning much like this, with traffic on the I-5 near Sacramento moving briskly, despite gathering fog. Suddenly, the misty veil turns into a wall of white, blinding those behind the wheel.

(Crash footage; photos of car crashes; firemen working at crash; city street; photo of Michael Rose)

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Mr. ROSE: As I entered the fog which was just instantaneously, saw the wrecked truck and trailer, and then it was not even a second when I crashed.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) The fire rages for hours, long enough for news crews to arrive on scene and record.

(Crash footage)

Mr. ROSE: Explosions, hissing, crackling fire, skidding tires on highway.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) How suddenly everything in life has changed.

(Crash footage)

Chief MARK MEAKER (Elk Grove Fire Department): Large stretch of highway, massive number of vehicles strewn all over the place, some exploded, torn apart, burning, smoke, fire, fuel down, just a chaotic environment.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) And when the blaze is finally put out, the destruction is unbelievable. Nearly 40 cars and trucks virtually melted together.

(Crash footage)

Mr. ROSE: One of the things that I'll never forget is the sound of that accident.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) Michael Rose made it out of that crash, but five others were killed, 26 injured. While many pileups occur in foggy weather, they can happen anytime, anyplace, in any condition. So, what steps can you take to improve your odds on the road? Well, your first line of defense is still to buckle your seat belt and shoulder harness. Then take a look at the way you drive. Some safety analysts warn that on our crowded highways, where drivers feel anxious to hurry to get there faster, their unthinking urgency is a lurking disaster.

(Crash footage; cars crashing; person putting on seat belt; cars on highway; crash footage)

Mr. CHARLES CLEMENS: The drivers, they don't react to the road or weather conditions that they're being faced with.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) Charles Clemens investigates auto crashes, working on safety issues with auto makers. He says regardless of road conditions, it's driver error that's usually to blame for these pileups.

(Charles Clemens and Keith Morrison walking; crash footage)

Mr. CLEMENS: The tailgating, people who are--are cutting in, particularly in rush-hour traffic, or when they're entering or exiting the freeways, for example.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) In crash after crash, it's been found that drivers were going too fast for road conditions, or too close to the driver ahead. So, to keep yourself safe, space yourself. You can do that with the three second rule. When the car ahead passes a landmark, like a sign, begin counting. If you get to the landmark before you count to three, you're too close. When the weather deteriorates, add a second or two. This is the kind of trick you may need because of tricks your brain can play in rough weather. Dr. Robert Snowden runs a study to find out how the brain deals with fog. Using a simulator with no speedometer, he asks subjects to judge their speed. When the screen image is clear, they can usually stay at 70. But when the screen is shrouded in fog:

(Cars driving; road signs; cars driving in rain; Robert Snowden working; person using driving simulator)

Unidentified Test Subject: I can't see where I'm going.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) Dr. Robert Snowden runs a study to find out how the brain deals with fog. Using a simulator with no speedometer, he asks subjects to judge their speed. When the screen image is clear they can usually stay at 70. But when the scene is shrouded in fog...

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(Snowden and man at computer simulator; man running simulator; screen image of clear weather; screen image of foggy weather)

Test Subject: I can't see what I'm doing.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) The change is dramatic.

(Man at computer simulator controls)

Dr. ROBERT SNOWDEN: They would drive at something like 90 or 95 miles an hour under fairly foggy conditions. It was one of those situations where the fogger we make it, the faster people drive.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) The culprit appears to be a group of cells in the back of the brain. They have two jobs: to judge speed and contrast. The trouble is they sometimes get those jobs confused. No one yet knows why. So with low visibility, when you're not concentrating on the speedometer, you might actually find yourself speeding up straight into trouble.

(Computer simulated diagram of brain and car; man running computer simulator; cars on highway in bad weather)

Dr. SNOWDEN: This is, of course, when we should look down, because it's the one point where our senses are telling us the wrong information.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) But what if you keep the proper speed and watch the road and still can't avoid being hit from all sides? There are a number of actions you can take to get out alive, but the first thing to cross your mind could actually be the wrong thing to do.

(Cars on highway; crash on highway; pileup of cars in crash on snowy road)

MORRISON: When an accident has occurred is it a good idea to get out of the car as fast as you can?

Unidentified Man: Unless there's some immediate danger to you, for example the car is on fire, the best place to stay is in the car until help arrives.

MORRISON: (Voiceover) That's because, as damaged as your car might be, it gives you more protection than wandering on the road where you could be hit by swerving cars or even emergency vehicles. So, if it's safe, move your car completely away from the crash site. If not, just stay put and stay in your car. Even from inside the car, there are things to do if you've planned ahead. Now is time to get on the cell phone. You should have one with you when you drive. Using a cell phone from the accident scene can help emergency officials zero in on you. And always keep a flashlight in the glove compartment. It's an excellent way to signal rescuers, and getting their attention quickly is crucial to getting out safely.

Some innovations just coming on the market may soon help reduce pileups. They're collision warning systems, using radar to alert the driver to unseen vehicles. And down the road a decade or two? Could be the ultimate in highway safety--the automated highway. As seen in this test, magnets on the roadway radio transceivers and radar sensors, enable computers in cars to set safe spacing. Even at highway speed, cars can be kept as little as seven feet apart. But experts say right now there's a simple thought to keep mind to keep out of those massive accidents.

(Wrecked car; cars on busy highway; diagram of car going off road; cars in pileup; cell phone; beam from flashlight; rescuers at crash scene; diagram of collision warning system; cars in test of automated highway; cars on highway in bad weather)

Offscreen Voice: There's an old saying that goes, you know, 'You should strive to drive to arrive alive.' You know, it's a lot better to get someplace 10 or 15 minutes late than to get there two weeks later after you get out of the hospital.

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PHILLIPS: One additional note, it's recommended that everyone in a vehicle ride in an upright position. That's because if you're leaning back or lying down, you won't get much protection from a seat belt or an air bag. You can join investigators looking for the causes of some of the world's worst pileups Sunday night on Discovery Channel.

Announcer: Coming up, two families forever linked by two little girls switched at birth. What's happened in the year since they met? Can a recent court decision help them come together? The very latest on an incredible reunion.

(Announcements)

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