

Railroad Crossing Safety

RISK ENGINEERING – YOUR BUSINESS INSURANCE SPECIALISTS



Patience is key

Railroad crossing accidents are among the deadliest types of vehicle accidents, and they occur more frequently than many people think. According to the Federal Railroad Administration, 2,059 private and public rail crossing accidents were reported in 2015, which resulted in 244 fatalities and 967 injuries. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) statistics estimate that a train collides with a vehicle or person about every 105 minutes.

Motorists are often unable to see oncoming trains from a distance or judge effectively how fast they are approaching. Vegetation, railroad tracks. Trains can also be difficult to see at night and during inclement weather because rail cars are often dark in color and lack reflective surfaces or lights. In addition, large objects, such as trains, appear to travel more slowly than their actual speed; therefore, it's easy to misjudge how much time is available to safely cross a railroad crossing. It is also more difficult to gauge the speed of a train from a perpendicular view of the tracks; for example, when looking at an approaching train from or near the crossing. Each of these limitations increases the risk of a deadly railroad-highway crossing accident.

Giving consideration to the amount of time it will take you to fully clear a railroad grade crossing is important. Depending on the size, weight, and speed of your vehicle it could take 10 seconds or more for your vehicle to completely cross a railroad grade. In this time, a train traveling 50 mph will travel 733 feet. If you are not certain whether there is enough time to safely cross the tracks, don't take the risk!

Safety experts recommend taking the following safety precautions when approaching and crossing a railroad grade crossing:

- Never assume railroad crossing lights and gates are working properly. Always check visually for an approaching train.
- Commercial motor vehicles transporting passengers and certain hazardous materials are required to stop at all railroad grade crossings. Drivers should activate their four-way flashers to warn traffic that they are slowing down and stopping.

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- Roll down your window to listen for approaching trains.
- Look for multiple tracks; there may be more than one train.
- If the tracks aren't level with the roadway, verify that there is adequate clearance for your vehicle. Getting stuck on the tracks can be extremely dangerous.
- Never cross a railroad grade unless you are sure you can completely cross and move at least 15 feet beyond the railroad tracks.
- Never change gears while crossing railroad tracks.
- On a multi-track crossing, verify that there are no other trains approaching before proceeding.
- Never cross tracks when warning signals or gates are in operation.
- Always stop within 50 feet of a crossing (unless behind other vehicles) but not closer than 15 feet to the crossing.

After crossing railroad tracks, remember the following:

- Be sure your vehicle is clear of the tracks before stopping.
- Watch for impatient drivers. Drivers of other vehicles may choose to pass you while you're getting up to speed.
- After clearing rough crossings, it's a good idea to stop at a safe location to check your vehicle and cargo.

Inclement weather increases risk

The probability of having an accident at a railroad crossing increases during periods of inclement weather and when visibility is reduced. You can experience reduced visibility during periods of snow, fog, rain, smoke, and darkness.

Precautions should also be taken when snow or ice could affect your ability to stop quickly if necessary. During these conditions, it's a good practice to stop at all railroad crossings to look and listen. Drivers should take all necessary precautions to ensure they will not be stranded on a railroad crossing. However, if despite these precautions your vehicle becomes stuck on a railroad crossing, here are some precautions safety experts recommend:

1. Get out of the vehicle immediately and move a safe distance away from the vehicle and railroad tracks.
2. Contact emergency response personnel to tell them the location of the crossing where you are stranded.
3. If a train is approaching and you can do so safely, attempt to signal the crew from a safe location on the same side of the crossing that the train is approaching from.
4. If you are running from a potential collision, run at an angle, toward the approaching train, to avoid any flying collision debris that may result.

A good rule of thumb to avoid a rail-highway crossing accident is to always expect a train at any time on any track. Slow down so you can see the railroad tracks in both directions and verify that no trains are coming. If required by law – or if necessary because of reduced visibility – stop, look, and listen for trains. Finally, never attempt to beat a train to a railroad crossing. Waiting for a train to clear the tracks may require some patience, but this is a small cost to pay to avoid a serious collision that could place you and others in great danger.

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