

Slow Drivers – ‘Progress’ at a ‘Snail’s Pace’?



Usually, driving slower and within the speed limit is a good thing. You won't attract a speeding ticket, there will be lower fuel costs and you become more aware of your surroundings. However, driving too slowly is considered to be unsafe. Whether you're travelling on a motorway or passing through a residential area, driving too fast is extremely dangerous. Studies have shown that driving your car too slowly runs the same amount of risks as speeding. In the eyes of the law, driving too slowly is a hazard to those who are following the maximum speed limit and may cause unnecessary road rage to other drivers. This can lead to drivers taking risks and making dangerous decisions. Faster cars may then need to apply their brakes sharply which can create the domino effect resulting in crashes. Driving too slowly for no apparent reason is deemed an offence coming under the category of "inconsiderate driving". This article looks at the reasons for slow driving, ways to cope, minimum speed limits on motorways, what the experts say about slow driving and the penalties involved. Finally, a conclusion is given.

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Slow Drivers – ‘Progress’ at a ‘Snail’s Pace’!

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“No person shall drive upon a highway at such a slow speed as to impede or block the normal and reasonable movement of traffic, except when reduced speed is necessary for safe operation because of a grade or compliance of the law”.¹

How often have you encountered a traffic situation where the road was jammed with cars and you were barely moving at a ‘snail’s pace’? ² In a television interview in the mid - 60s, rally driver Pat Moss – sister of Formula One racing legend Sir Stirling Moss – stated that slow drivers were equally as dangerous as fast drivers. Her view then, as now, appears to be equally valid as many of today’s motoring experts will testify. When we think about speed limits, we automatically think about the maximum speed that we are permitted to travel on different roads and the type of vehicle we are driving. We all understand the need for keeping to a restricted speed because the safety of ourselves and other road users is at stake. We also understand that exceeding the posted speed limit can result in points on our licence, a fine or even disqualification from driving. At one time or another, some drivers will have been held up behind a “*Friday afternoon car*” driver dawdling along at a “*Canterbury trot*” or a “snail’s pace” doing 50kmh in a 100kmh zone? Apart from being infuriating, it can be quite dangerous. Now, we don’t want drivers tearing around at 120kmh everywhere they go, but it would be considerate if these slow snail –like drivers move over if there’s a car behind them trying to overtake. Every motorist is aware (or should be, as ignorance is no excuse of the law) that speeding can lead to big fines and points on your licence, but what about driving too slow. Surely, a person is entitled to drive as slow as they wish if they feel it’s a safe speed and are comfortable with. Also, by keeping well to the left, following traffic can overtake so what problem are they (slow drivers) creating? Well, you could be in ‘hot water’ if your driving is considered to be too slow for “failing to proceed”, thus impeding other drivers and are a danger to other road users. Should you be apprehended for slow driving, penalties for dangerous or inconsiderate driving could flow if your behaviour is considered hazardous?

¹ 2012 Statute. Art. 15 – *Uniform act regulating traffic rules of the road. 8-1561 Minimum Speed Regulation (a)*. Kansas State Legislature.

² At a snail’s pace. The slowness of snails was pointed out about 200 BC by the Roman poet Plautus and the term ‘snail’s pace’ in English goes back to about 1400. Relative to its size, however, a snail travels a considerable distance each day using the undersurface of its muscular foot to propel itself. Idioms.freedictionary.com

“Crawl On By”

Bad drivers are the bane of any motorist’s existence, but terrible drivers just come in one flavour ... aggressive drivers, confused drivers, drivers who clearly have no idea where they are going, learner drivers (we’ll forgive these ones), speed demons with a shiny new car or the Honda Civic boy-racer and possibly the most annoying of all - the slow driver. These are the cars that “crawl on by” at a “snail’s pace” way under the posted speed limit, leaving everyone stuck behind them with the temptation to just get out and walk because it might actually be faster. However, slow drivers are not just annoying; they can actually be downright dangerous. When a driver is crawling along because they don’t know exactly where they’re going, that often means that they aren’t exactly best friends with their indicator. Not because they don’t know what or where it is, but because by the time they figure out where they need to turn, it’s basically too late. Driving well below the posted speed limit has been found to trigger tailgating, undertaking, congestion and road rage by other drivers. Under Belgian law, drivers are not allowed to obstruct the normal flow of traffic by driving abnormally slowly where there is no reason for doing so. They are not allowed to brake suddenly if this is not in the interest of road safety. The latest figures for the Home Ministry show that in 2013, 150 drivers were fined on motorways alone for failing to keep up with traffic. A minimum of 70km/h is expected on Belgian motorways. It was liberal lawmaker Subien Lahaye-Battheu who requested the figures. She said she’s pleased that it’s not only speeding motorists who are fined but also driving too slowly can be extremely dangerous. She added: *“Speed cameras are not the solution. They cannot register drivers who are driving abnormally slow. It’s not feasible; otherwise everybody who ended up in a jam would be fined”*.³

What the Experts Say!

A poll of 2,000 drivers commissioned by car maker Hyundai in 2018 found *“someone driving too slowly in front of you”* is the seventh most common reason motorists swear when they are behind the wheel. Hundreds of drivers have had crashes as a result of slow drivers, latest figures reveal. According to the Department for Transport (DfT), (GB) the number of casualties have increased by almost a third in 2017. Data shows 175 people were injured and two killed in such accidents on Britain’s roads in 2017 – an increase of 31pc upon the previous year. A DfT spokesman said: *“careless driving, including driving too slowly is an offence and anyone caught faces prosecution”*. These avoidable accidents have been slammed by leading motoring experts.

³ VRT NWS. *Scores of drivers fined for slowcoach driving*. vrt.be

Edmund Kind, President of the Automobile Association (AA) warned that “*driving like a snail can be as dangerous as driving like a cheetah*”. He added that too many motorway drivers hog the middle lane and drive “*far below the speed limit*” which can lead to undertaking, tailgating, congestion and road rage. Neil Greig Director of Policy and Research at IAM RoadSmart said that slow drivers increase the risk of an accident and will make the other driver look worse to insurers if there is a collision. Mr. Greig added:

*“Slow drivers are just one extra hazard that any good driver must be able to deal with. By using the key advanced skills of observation, anticipation and patience, anyone should be able to cope with a hesitant or tardy person on the road. If you run into the rear of someone then, it is most likely insurers will see it as your fault”.*⁴

Reasons For Slow Driving

The following are some reasons for driving slowly, but not exhaustive. One reason is distraction where the driver is paying more attention to their phone and slows down in an effort to multitask. Research by Australia’s Queensland University of Technology published in 2017; found that the risk of an accident can be increased by motorists who slow down when they use their mobile phone.⁵ Another reason that people drive slowly is because they are scared and lack confidence to drive more quickly. There are other reasons why someone is scared of driving at normal speeds. They could be new and inexperienced drivers who aren’t used to dual-carriageway or motorway speeds yet. Someone with vision problems may drive slowly so that they don’t accidentally collide with something. Elderly drivers may not be able to consistently hold down the gas pedal that keeps their car moving at an appropriate speed. People who are new to an area may drive slowly. They may be a tourist who is map reading or perhaps more interested in the sights than paying attention to the road. Also, a person new to a busy area may also unintentionally drive slower, so they have more time to figure out traffic problems and give themselves room to react to hazards. Individuals who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs may also drive slowly because they are impaired and unable to make appropriate decisions on how fast they are driving. Then there is the driver who deliberately drives slowly in an effort to ‘control’ and ‘police’ the following driver from exceeding the posted speed limit. And of course there’s the inquisitive motorway/dual carriageway ‘rubbernecker’.

⁴ Express (December 2018). *Spike in road deaths caused by SLOW DRIVERS – shock figures reveal*. Express.co.uk

⁵ *Spike in road deaths caused by SLOW DRIVERS – shock figures reveal*. itv.co, (29 December 2018).

Ways to Cope

In order to avoid issues with slow drivers, it's important to recognize the dangers these drivers pose. Be patient and make correct decisions on how to overtake or get away from an unsafe slow driver. Don't get into a fit of road rage if you can't overtake. It's better to make yourself visible to slow drivers by using the tools that are in your vehicle. A quick flash of your headlights from a safe distance may suffice, if that doesn't work, you could use your car horn to gain their attention. A quick bleep may get their attention; however, excessive honking or 'laying on' the horn is not the way to remedy the situation. Don't set your sights on entering the Guinness Book of Records for the longest horn beep of all times. So, what do you do after flashing your headlights and sounding your horn and the slow driver still won't move over? That, my friends, is your decision and yours alone. Just make sure that whatever you do, it doesn't endanger your life or those around you and not escalate into road rage. A final suggestion - leave home in plenty of time, so that you are not rushed and might be tempted to take chances which could lead to an accident. Also, be leaving yourself plenty of time you should have adequate time to change a wheel if you get a puncture or deal with some other fault. Even though, you may be held up for some time behind a slow driver, you will arrive at your destination in safely and in a calm and relaxed manner.

Penalties for Slow Driving

Drivers caught speeding will be given points on the licence and a fine. This may happen even if you're driving slightly above the speed limit. Such penalties have increased recently as more speeding motorists are now subject to higher fines which bear a direct relation to the difference in your speed to that of the limit – as well as your weekly income? Aggravating or extenuating factors can cause the amount you pay to be increased or decreased. Depending on the severity of the offence, you may be given the option to avoid points and a fine by completing a Speed Awareness Course instead, or – at the other end of the spectrum – receive a disqualification from driving. But is the enforcement of slow speeds also punitive? The short answer is no. That's not to say minimum speed limits aren't legally enforceable; they are. But there are no slow speed cameras at present to catch motorists who are driving too slowly. It's possible that one of the reasons for this is that strict enforcement of this law throws up a number of exceptions for example, in a situation where you are impeded, and then you would be able to offer a valid defence. This would include being stuck in traffic where you shouldn't be penalized for crawling along in a queue. (*An example would be where traffic returning to London, Brent Cross via the M1 on a Sunday evening where you find significant slow queues in all lanes. Ed.*) Likewise, if you have to slow down for a hazard, the minimum speed limit shouldn't be enforced either.

Minimum Speed Limits on Motorways

In the UK, there is no official minimum speed limit on motorways. While uncommon, there are certain countries that impose a minimum speed limit as part of their driving laws. Various roads in Japan, the USA and Ireland (motorways) are all subject to minimum speeds. Just as their maximum counterparts, minimum speed limits are designed to increase road safety. Instead of accelerating and braking, keeping vehicles above a certain speed, helps to keep traffic moving. This is particularly important because when stopping, traffic may cause problems for emergency vehicles to get through – in tunnels for instance. ⁶ In general, road works, variable speed control and traffic flow can all affect minimum speed on a motorway, so setting a minimum speed can be problematic. Some countries set a minimum speed however, it seems to work effectively. But generally, in the UK, minimum speeds are temporary and are usually highlighted by circular road signs. Travelling too slowly can be dangerous and you may attract police attention and even be prosecuted for careless driving. Many people in the UK think there is a minimum speed limit on motorways and dual-carriageways. Currently, this is not the case. However, there are several driving laws in place which do have a knock-on effect of penalizing motorway driving that is too slow. It may well be in the future that we will join the likes of America, where it is common to see a minimum speed limit sign for major highways. Indeed, this is something that has already been proposed: a failed petition called for a minimum speed limit of 60mph back in 2011. Despite calls for more minimum speed limits in the UK stretching back several years, there are currently not many restrictions in place; roads that limit speed – such as the Mersey tunnel. (*Back in the 60s, Blackwall Tunnel, London had a minimum speed limit of 10mph Ed.*) Similar to most speed limit signs, minimum speed limit signs are circular and contain a number, they can be differentiated by the colour. Instead of the ‘vibrant’ red that we are more used to seeing, minimum speed limit signs sport a blue circular sign and a white rim. In Ireland, there is a minimum speed limit on motorways which states that any vehicle that cannot reach a speed of 50kmh is not allowed on them. This would include some tractors and heavy slow moving vehicles except with permission from the police and the various county councils the vehicle traverses. Sometimes minimum speed limits are protected vicariously – through other legislation. On motorways, for instance, there is a prohibition on vehicles that are unable to maintain 25mph, when unladen, on level ground. At present in the UK, there is no legislation for minimum speed limits on motorways.

⁶ *Is there a minimum speed limit?* blog.passmefast.co.uk

Although there have been calls for years to set a minimum speed limit, the practicalities of doing so means that at present there is still no specific minimum speed. For certain categories of vehicles, there are slower speed limits e.g. caravans, trailers and LGVs have a speed limit of 60mph. The illegal act of undertaking – reinforced by the recent move to crack down on middle-lane hogging, not only helps ensure that motorists respect the use of different lanes, but also rules that slower drivers must keep to the left. And even though an exact minimum speed is not stipulated, the effect is not undermined. By assessing the relationship of your speed to others, police can largely determine whether you're driving considerately; if you are travelling a lot slower than other traffic within the speed limit, then you should have a valid reason for doing so. Minimum speed limits are rare on UK roads, but driving too slowly on any road can result in the motorist being penalized for careless driving, which normally carries £100 fine and three points on your licence.

Brake – 5 Reasons to Drive More Slowly⁷

According to Brake, speeding is the biggest cause of road traffic collisions and exceeding the speed limit by even a few miles per hour can have a catastrophic impact in a collision. *(A vehicle travelling at 65km/h is twice as likely to have a crash. However, this rises exponentially to 32 times if a vehicle is travelling at 80km/h. Ed.)* What is less discussed is the impact of speeding on your driving behaviour in general – what happens to you and your car when you drive slowly. What are the benefits? *(Here, it appears that Brake is advising people to avoid speeding and driving too fast. It also appears that their interpretation of driving slowly is driving at 'normal' speeds or a little slower but not at a 'snail's pace'. Ed.)* Brake outlines the following five good reasons to drive slowly, for yourself and for all those around you:

- **Safety.** Driving more slowly is crucial to road safety. Every 1mph reduction in average speeds is estimated to lead to a 5pc fall in crash rates. Police at crash sites record breaking the speed limit or travelling too fast for the prevailing conditions as a contributory factor in more than one in four (27%) fatal crashes in the UK.
- **Wear & Tear.** Speed has a huge impact on wear and tear from the moment you start your car to the moment you put on the hand brake.

⁷ *Five reasons to drive more slowly.* Brake the road safety charity. brake.org

It's much kinder to your engine to start the car and move away slowly than to start the engine and wait for it to warm up before roaring away. Harsh braking and cornering at speed also takes a toll on your tyres.

- **Fuel Costs.** Once you're on the road, slower driving means lower fuel a cost – driving faster tend to burn more fuel and is a less efficient way to drive. It has a big impact on stopping and starting on your journey too – rapid acceleration and harsh braking also affect your fuel emissions.
- **Awareness.** Slower driving makes you more aware of and responsive to your environment making you more likely to react safely to potential hazards. Take every opportunity to look, see and act on what's happening well ahead and around you. This pays off not only in terms of collision prevention, but also a more efficient and relaxing drive.
- **Stress.** Driving more slowly and carefully means less stress for you and for other road users around you. The desire to get everywhere at top speed is a big source of stress – accept that you can't control traffic flow. Simply observe your situation and then make your move ... and save yourself and others from road rage.

Conclusion

When all's said and done, what this really means is that travelling safely goes beyond the bare minimum of following road sign speed limits. The duty is imposed upon us the moment we sit in the driving seat – and when we pass our driving test, that responsibility becomes all the greater. That's why changes to the practical driving test are so important: they should help prepare people for driving independently. Whether the road has an explicit minimum speed limit or not, we should always be mindful and considerate when driving and most importantly, to drive according to the prevailing road, weather and traffic conditions. For some, it may be maddening to slog along behind a slowcoach (driver) crawling along at a 'snail's pace' – but it has never cost anyone a drop of blood, so keep your temper in check and wait until you can overtake safely because all logjams clear eventually. If you are a slow driver and have a "collection of followers" (many following like a flock of sheep in single file) remain at the slower speed and allow them to pass. Even though there are not many minimum speed limits in operation, drivers cannot drive as slow as they want. There are penalties for those who drive at a 'snail's pace' and cause disruption to other road traffic. Penalties can include points, fines or imprisonment.

Now that 'L' drivers are allowed on motorways accompanied by ADIs with dual-controlled cars, it will give them a good insight into driving at higher speeds which they can also apply on the non-motorway network. When driving it is up to each and every one of us to drive at a speed that we are capable of and are comfortable with. A speed that does not exceed the posted speed limit but a speed that is suitable for the prevailing road, weather and traffic conditions. However, we must drive at an appropriate speed – a speed that to an extent 'fits in' with other traffic so traffic is moving freely. A speed that is equal to the "normal and reasonable" traffic speed. Driving too slow or driving at a 'snail's pace' can be infuriating for some and dangerous too. Now, we don't want drivers tearing around at 120kmh everywhere they go, but it would be considerate if these *Canterbury Trot*, slow snail –like drivers move over if there's a car trying to overtake. You could be in 'hot water' if your driving is considered to be too slow for "failing to proceed" and a danger to other road users, with penalties for dangerous or inconsiderate driving if your behaviour is considered hazardous. Finally, you know when you've reached middle age when you're cautioned to slow down by your doctor, instead of by the police.