

9. Road Safety

9.1 Traffic

Today's traffic conditions present hazards for all pedestrians. The dangers for blind people are constantly increasing: cars become quieter, filter lights at junctions complicate the timing of the decision to leave the curb, and the curbs themselves are often rounded rather than right-angled so that vehicles are able to turn into and out of side roads more quickly.

Add to these problems the fact that the volume of traffic has increased markedly in the last ten years, and it becomes immediately obvious that the days are long past when the Guide Dog provided a measure of safety in virtually any traffic situation.

However, it is still true to say that, in certain conditions where the volume of traffic is light and distractions are few, the dog does provide a measure of safety. To maintain your dog's awareness of traffic, it is necessary to artificially reinforce this aspect. The following procedure should be practiced regularly – preferably once on each walk – unless the dog begins to “stick” at curbs as a result of over-awareness, in which case reinforcement should be stopped for a few days and then reintroduced on a regular basis.

1. You are walking with the main road on your right, houses and yards on your left.
2. Upon reaching a quiet side road, wait until a car comes along from the left on the near side of the road.
3. Just before the car pulls in front of you, give your dog an ordinary “Forward” command. Do not use a hand signal or the driver will become alarmed and will probably stop to allow you to cross.
4. Your dog should, of course, disobey this command, in which case you give gentle praise. If he/she makes any attempt to move off, restrain him/her with a backward check on the handle and the commands, “No! Stay!”
5. Once the car has pulled away, reassess the crossing and give a normal “Forward” command with hand signal once the road is clear.

This reinforcement applies only to near traffic. Under no circumstances should you deliberately begin to cross a road in order to test or reinforce your dog's far traffic awareness. This is highly dangerous for yourself and also for those (including your dog) who may be forced into a state of panic by your actions.

If you suspect that your dog's overall traffic awareness is poor, contact GDTx for advice or to arrange an aftercare visit.

9.2 Aids to Road Safety

When crossing roads, you are safer if you pay attention to the following points:

1. Do not rush. Cross steadily so that your dog and the drivers have time to react correctly if you have made an error in judging the traffic flow.
2. Cross at junctions rather than halfway along a stretch of road. At junctions, you are more visible, the drivers are more prepared to encounter pedestrians, and there is less chance of you suddenly emerging from between parked cars. Also, your dog is more inclined to cross in a straight line here, as he/she can see the continuation of the pavement on the far side of the road.
3. Wherever possible, use pedestrian light controlled crossings, even if it means a slight detour from your regular route.
4. Do not cross roads near brows of hills or bends.
5. If possible, wear light clothing that may help to make you more visible to drivers, particularly at night.
6. Remember that wet or icy road conditions can seriously affect the stopping distances of motor vehicles and, as a result, extra caution is required.
7. Do accept help from members of the public, even if it is offered at a road that you normally cross independently. At some other time, you or another blind person may welcome that help.

In today's traffic conditions, remember that it is unreasonable to expect your dog to make accurate assessments of traffic flow. Because dogs do not know the potential danger of vehicles, a correct response can never be guaranteed.