



Over the Edge and Back

What to do if you drive
off the pavement edge



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Pavement edge drop-off

Pavement edge drop-off is a common safety hazard, and is particularly dangerous if the difference in height between the pavement and the adjacent surface is two inches or more. Drop-offs can result from broken pavement, erosion of an unpaved shoulder, inadequate maintenance, or the resurfacing of a travel lane but not its adjacent shoulder.

You may be caught by surprise... suddenly you feel one or two of your tires drop off the pavement.

If you do drive off the pavement and do not know the recommended recovery technique, you could lose control of your vehicle and crash into a tree or other object alongside the road, crash into another vehicle on the road, or even roll over.

Although relatively infrequent compared to other types of crashes, pavement edge drop-off crashes are over twice as likely to be fatal relative to other crashes on similar roads.

What to do if you drive off the pavement edge

You may drive, or be forced, off the road for any number of reasons, so it's good to know what to do—and what not to—if it happens. It's not about returning to the road quickly; it's about returning to the road safely.

Follow these steps:

- **IF THE SHOULDER IS WIDE ENOUGH AND YOUR PATH IS CLEAR**

Continue to look at the road ahead. Drive all the way onto the shoulder. Gradually stop and “collect yourself.” Wait for a large gap in traffic, and then drive back onto the road.

- **IF YOU CAN'T DRIVE ALL THE WAY ONTO THE SHOULDER AND STOP**

Continue to look and steer straight ahead. Do not try to steer back onto the road immediately—this can cause you to lose control of your vehicle and crash. For example, if you're driving at a high speed and you suddenly steer sharply, you may accidentally drive into oncoming traffic. Moreover, if your tires are close to the pavement edge and you attempt to drive back onto the road, they may “scrub” against the edge rather than surmount it. This makes it very difficult to drive back onto the road, and you are at risk of overcorrecting, losing control, and crashing into another vehicle or roadside object.





SCRUBBING: If you drive too close to the pavement edge, tire scrubbing will make it difficult to return to the road.



STRADDLING: Steer to straddle the pavement edge, moving the outer tires away from the drop-off.



QUARTER TURN: Turn the steering wheel about one-quarter turn to the left and drive back onto the pavement.

- **IF THERE ARE NO OBSTACLES DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF YOU**

Steer to “straddle” the pavement edge. Move the tires that are off the road away from the pavement edge, and then steer parallel to it. This will prevent your tires from scrubbing. Most importantly, continue to look at the road ahead.

- **DO NOT SLAM ON THE BRAKES!**

Ease off the gas pedal. If you need to brake, brake very gently. If you brake hard while your tires are on different surfaces, this can cause your vehicle to skid.

- **SLOW DOWN GRADUALLY**

Slowing down will help you get back onto the road without losing control. If there are no obstacles in front of you, slow down to 25 mph or less before mounting the pavement.

- **TAKE SOME TIME TO “CALM DOWN”**

If you have room, drive all the way off the road and as far onto the shoulder as possible to stop.

- **WAIT UNTIL IT’S SAFE**

After you’ve slowed down or stopped, wait until there is a gap in traffic. Do not try to drive back onto the road if there is any traffic in your lane, or an adjacent or oncoming lane. When the road is “all clear,” turn the steering wheel about one-quarter turn to the left. Drive back onto the pavement. When all of your tires are on the pavement, steer back to the right to stay in your lane.

- **CALL FOR HELP**

If you cannot safely return to the roadway, drive as far off the pavement as you can, come to a gradual stop, and call for help.

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