

Road safety factsheet:

Overtaking

January 2024

Overtaking is one of the highest risk manoeuvres for both drivers and riders because it can place the overtaking vehicle into the path of oncoming traffic, often at high speeds. If there is a head-on collision, the speed of both vehicles combines to create a much more severe impact, resulting in more serious injuries to occupants of the overtaking vehicle and the road user it comes into conflict with.

In 2022, 6,280 vehicles were involved in an overtaking collision, of which 53 per cent were car drivers, and 32 per cent were motorcyclists¹.

There are three types of overtaking manoeuvre:

- Overtaking a moving vehicle on the offside
- Overtaking a stationary or parked vehicle, a rider or an object on the offside
- Undertaking on the nearside.

Table 1: Vehicles involved in overtaking collisions, 2022, Great Britain¹

	Cars	Buses or coaches	Van/light good vehicles	HGVs	Pedal cycles	Motorcycles	Total
Overtaking a moving vehicle - offside	1,782	22	167	42	124	1,124	3,261
Overtaking a stationary vehicle - offside	881	13	88	14	201	522	1,719
Overtaking - nearside	657	20	61	7	192	363	1,300
Total	3,320	55	316	63	517	2,009	6,280

¹ DfT (2023) RAS0503; Vehicle type and manoeuvre, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/reported-road-accidents-vehicles-and-casualties-tables-for-great-britain#factors-contributing-to-collisions-and-casualties-ras07>: Accessed January 2024

Road safety factsheet: Overtaking

When it is not safe to overtake

Road markings and road signs provide important information about when it is unsafe and illegal to overtake. Rule 165 of the Highway Code states that you must not overtake:

- if you would have to cross or straddle double white lines with a solid line nearest to you (see Rule [129](#)²)
- if you would have to enter an area designed to divide traffic, if it is surrounded by a solid white line
- the nearest vehicle to a pedestrian crossing, especially when it has stopped to let pedestrians cross
- if you would have to enter a lane reserved for buses, trams or cycles during its hours of operation
- after a 'No Overtaking' sign and until you pass a sign cancelling the restriction.

Even if there are no specific road markings or signs that prohibit overtaking, there are many situations when it is not safe to overtake. For example, Highway Code [Rule 166](#) advises that you do not overtake if you have any doubt that you can do so safely or that you can see far enough ahead to be sure it is safe. Common situations where overtaking is unwise are:

- a corner or a bend
- a hump bridge
- the brow of a hill.

[Rule 167](#) of the Highway Code advises drivers and riders not to overtake when it might cause conflict with other road users, for example:

- approaching or at a road junction on either side of the road
- where the road narrows
- when approaching a school crossing patrol
- between the kerb and a bus or tram when it is at a stop
- where traffic is queuing at junctions or road works
- when you would force another road user to swerve or slow down
- at a level crossing
- when a road user is indicating right, even if you believe the signal should have been cancelled. Do not take a risk; wait for the signal to be cancelled
- stay behind if you are following a cyclist approaching a roundabout or junction, and you intend to turn left
- when a tram is standing at a kerbside tram stop and there is no clearly marked passing lane for other traffic
-

² Rule 129 states that that you may cross the solid white line, "provided the road is clear, to pass a stationary vehicle, or overtake a pedal cyclist, horse or road maintenance vehicle, if they are travelling at 10 mph (16 km/h) or less'.

Road safety factsheet: Overtaking

Table 2: example road markings that may tell you that it is not safe to overtake

Road marking or sign	What does it mean? ³
<p>Double white line</p> 	<p>Double white lines mean that you must not cross or straddle it unless it is safe and you need to enter adjoining premises or a side road. You may cross the line, if necessary, provided the road is clear, to pass a stationary vehicle, or overtake a pedal cycle, horse or road maintenance vehicle, if they are travelling at 10 mph (16 km/h) or less.</p>
<p>Chevrons</p> 	<p>Chevrons separate traffic lanes or protect traffic turning right.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the area is bordered by a broken white line, you should not enter the area unless it is necessary and you can see that it is safe to do so. • If the area is marked with chevrons and bordered by solid white lines you must not enter it except in an emergency.
<p>Single unbroken white line</p> 	<p>A single unbroken white line means you may cross the lines to overtake if it is safe, provided you can complete the manoeuvre before reaching a solid white line on your side. White direction arrows on the road indicate that you need to move back onto your side of the road.</p>
<p>No overtaking sign</p> 	<p>Signs with red circles are mostly prohibitive. You must not overtake after passing a 'No Overtaking' sign and until you pass a sign cancelling the restriction.</p>

³ GOV.UK (2023) General rules, techniques and advice for all drivers and riders (103 to 158) <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/the-highway-code/general-rules-techniques-and-advice-for-all-drivers-and-riders-103-to-158#:~:text=Rule%20129,premises%20or%20a%20side%20road.>: Accessed January 2024

Road safety factsheet: Overtaking

<p>Hazard warning line</p> 	<p>Hazard warning lines are similar in appearance to centre lines with one key difference, the painted sections are longer in length than the broken unpainted stretches.</p> <p>When this line lengthens and the gaps shorten, it means that there is a hazard ahead. This hazard may not be immediately obvious.</p> <p>Do not cross it unless you can see the road is clear and wish to overtake or turn.</p>
---	--

Safe overtaking

RoSPA's advice is do not overtake unless you are sure you can complete the manoeuvre safely and without causing risk or inconvenience to another road user.

Allow plenty of time for your journey, so you do not feel pressured to exceed speed limits or make risky overtaking decisions. If you are planning a route which includes driving on single carriageway roads, then plan a bit of extra time into the journey in case you are slowed down by another road user or slow-moving vehicle.

If you are behind a slower moving vehicle, the first thing to ask yourself before overtaking is: do you need to? There are several reasons why overtaking could be unnecessary. For example, if:

- The vehicle in front is traveling at or near the speed limit
- You will shortly be turning off the road you are on
- The vehicle in front might shortly turn off the road (look for clues, such as junctions ahead)
- A dual carriageway is not far away.

Is it safe to overtake?

If you decide to overtake, the next question is, is it safe? Can you see far enough ahead to make sure you have time to pull out, overtake and pull back in, safely? In addition to the Highway Code's list of situations where overtaking is not advised, there are several other factors to consider:

- Are there any junctions from which a vehicle might emerge while you're overtaking?
- What is in front of the vehicle, rider or object you're overtaking?
- Is there a gap you can safely pull back into after you have overtaken?
- Is the vehicle or rider likely to speed up while you are overtaking (for example, going downhill)? Can you complete the overtake without exceeding the speed limit?
- Is the vehicle or rider you're overtaking likely to turn right (are they indicating or positioned as if they might turn)?
- Is the vehicle or rider you're overtaking likely to pull out to overtake something in front of them (are they indicating or positioned as if they might do so)?
- What is happening behind you? Has anyone already started to overtake you?

Although you should complete an overtaking manoeuvre quickly, never exceed the speed limit for the road.

Road safety factsheet: Overtaking

If the vehicle in front of you is overtaking, then do not assume that it will be safe to follow. Make your own judgement of the situation. Do not overtake if you are in any doubt about the situation or how safe it is.

Overtaking large vehicles

Larger vehicles can obscure the view to the front of your car more and so overtaking can be more difficult.

Drop back from the vehicle ahead, this will allow you to see ahead better and give the driver in front more chance to see you in their mirrors. Do not get too close to a long or slow-moving vehicle.

Make sure you know what is in front of the long vehicle you are overtaking, and that there is enough space to move into at the end of the overtaking manoeuvre. Remember that there might be a second slow or long vehicle in front of the one you are about to overtake.

Check that no one behind you has already started to overtake you and the large vehicle in front of you.

Overtaking vulnerable road users

Pedal cyclists and motorcyclists

Give riders as much room as you would when overtaking a car (1.5 metres) when overtaking at speeds of up to 30mph and more at higher speeds. Remember that riders may need to suddenly avoid a drain cover, pothole, debris or a wet, oily or icy patch of road, which could cause them to wobble or swerve. It is also very unpleasant to be overtaken closely when you're on two wheels.

Motorists should be aware that cyclists are advised to ride in the primary position (also known as "taking the lane" – when the cyclist rides in the centre of the lane) when the road is narrow or their visibility needs to be improved. This is to discourage dangerous manoeuvres on stretches of road where there is not enough room for motorists to overtake safely.

Horses

Be especially careful when overtaking horses. Give them plenty of room, do not rev your engine or sound your horn. Pass them slowly at 10mph or less and with a wide berth (at least two metres). If there is not room to do so, be patient and wait until there is. Look out for any signals the horse rider may give you.

Overtaking at night

Even greater care is needed when overtaking at night. Visibility is reduced, even in areas with street lighting, and it is harder to judge speed and distance.

Being overtaken

As well as overtaking, we are also overtaken by others. When being overtaken, try not to speed up, move out or in any way make it more difficult for the driver or rider overtaking you to complete their manoeuvre safely. If necessary, slow down to let them pass and pull back in safely. Once you have been overtaken, make sure that there's a safe gap between you and the vehicle in front; if necessary, drop back to maintain the two second gap.