

Safety Zone: Determining Preventable and Non-Preventable Vehicle Accidents

When investigating a vehicle accident, we often rely upon an old adage of trying to find out who is at fault. After all, if it was determined our driver is not at fault, then he/she was operating a vehicle correctly. Right?

Believe it or not, just because a driver is not found to be at fault does not mean that he/she could not have done something to avoid an accident in the first place. Our primary objective in investigating vehicle accidents should be to prevent our drivers from being involved in ANY accident regardless of fault.

However, the questions we typically ask include:

- Was someone cited?
- Was a claim paid?
- What did the police report say?

These questions are certainly valid. But they focus solely on assigning blame or placing the burden of safe driving on a single individual instead of many or all parties who may have contributed to it. Additionally, they focus on assigning blame or placing the burden of safe driving on a single individual instead of many or all parties involved.

By determining an accident's preventability rather than just fault, you can focus on the root causes and increase the likelihood of developing the proper corrective actions to address the issues. For anyone assessing or judging an accident, it is imperative as many facts about conditions and circumstances as possible are gathered, whether they are in the driver's control or not.

When is an Accident Preventable?

The [National Safety Council \(NSC\)](#) defines a preventable collision as "a collision in which the driver failed to do everything reasonable to avoid it."

On the other hand, an accident is non-preventable when the driver is legally parked or properly stopped at the direction of a law enforcement officer, a signal, stop sign or traffic condition.

There are exceptions to these definitions, but treat them as such and do not allow excuses to influence the determination, such as weather conditions or actions of other drivers. These concepts are generated from the National Safety Council.

The California Highway Patrol describes crashes using the word "collision" rather than "accident" because they consider almost all collisions not as accidents, but perfectly preventable collisions.

Types of Vehicle Collisions

INTERSECTION COLLISIONS

Failing to observe the right-of-way, whether a stop sign or light is present, is preventable. To be deemed a non-preventable accident, the vehicle must be struck in the extreme rear or side while the driver was protected by lights or stop signs.

At an intersection, regardless of lights, signs, or right-of-way, a driver should know to yield to anyone who assumes the right-of-way. A responsible driver should also know and understand the turning radius of the vehicle and avoid damaging others. These are preventable collisions.

SIDSWIPES

Drivers should be able to judge distances properly when leaving a parking spot and enter traffic safely.

Drivers should be able to pass other vehicles and pull back into the lane of travel when the other vehicle in the rearview mirror becomes visible. Similarly, a driver can prepare for a passing vehicle by slowing down to let another vehicle overtake him/her while passing.

Parked vehicles can have people opening doors unexpectedly, and a driver should anticipate this. This type of accident is non-preventable only if the driver is already passing and the door opens.

A skilled driver knows to stay out of another vehicle's blind spots or have vehicles traveling in their blind spots for long periods.

PEDESTRIAN AND ANIMAL COLLISION

Collisions with a pedestrian are usually considered preventable, even in cases of pedestrians coming out from between parked cars. Awareness of the presence of children, congested areas, bus stops, etc., is critical. Similarly, collisions with animals are typically preventable when the driver can recognize the presence of animals in the area.

In either case, the collision should only be considered non-preventable if the pedestrian was behaving so unreasonably that there was no way for the driver to have anticipated the actions or the animal was behaving unusually or unexpectedly in an area where animals are not expected to be present.

PARKED OR STOPPED VEHICLE COLLISION

The collision is non-preventable if the vehicle is properly and legally parked. All other accidents with the vehicle double-parked or in a “No Parking” zone are preventable.

MECHANICAL FAILURE

Mechanical defects and failures such as bad brakes, blown tires, etc., should be considered preventable. The driver should know how to properly conduct a pre-trip inspection before operating the vehicle at the beginning of each day. If, however, the failure was sudden and unexpected, not as a result of abuse or wear and tear, the collision may be considered non-preventable.

Setting Standards for Company Drivers

In 2020, there were an estimated 42,060 fatalities due to motor vehicle crashes. This is up 8% from 2019. Driving is a universal hazard, and vehicle crashes can have a devastating impact on households and businesses alike. This is why preventing future motor vehicle collisions at your organization is key to your success.

The bottom line is – what are the company standards for authorized drivers? Does the company train drivers in defensive driving skills as part of the employee eligibility and qualifications process?

According to the NSC:

More Than 90% of Crashes are Caused by Human Error

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