

TRAFFIC AND SAFETY INFORMATIONAL SERIES

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTION #17

What Are the Recommended Safe Driving Practices at Railroad Crossings?

Signs, signals, and gates are installed at railroad crossings for safety. Unfortunately, these controls are sometimes not obeyed, and the consequence may be a fatal crash. A 1997 study of rural railroad crossings showed that 67 percent of drivers crossed the tracks in front of a train even when warning lights were flashing, and 38 percent of drivers drove around lowered crossing gates. In 2020, 33 crashes occurred at highway-railroad crossings in Iowa, resulting in 9 personal injuries.

Understanding the signs and signals at railroad crossings

Drivers can help reduce the number of crashes and fatalities at railroad crossings by obeying the law and by recognizing the signs, signals, and gates described below:

Advance warning signs are placed in advance of a railroad crossing and alert drivers to the crossing.

Railroad crossing (or crossbuck) signs identify the crossing location for motorists and are located at the crossing no closer than 15 feet measured perpendicular from the nearest rail and 6 to 12 feet from the edge of the shoulder or traveled way.

Alternate flashing lights are used to warn motorists that a train is present or approaching. Drivers should stop and wait until the lights stop flashing before looking in both directions and then proceeding.

A *descending gate arm* that extends across the approaching lanes of traffic blocks traffic at the crossing.



Advance warning sign



Railroad crossing (crossbuck) sign

Other tips for safe driving at railroad crossings

Operation Lifesaver, a nationwide public education program dedicated to reducing crashes at rail crossings, gives some tips for drivers at railroad crossings (<https://www.oli.org>):

- The only safe and legal place to cross railroad tracks is at designated crossings.
- Always obey warning signs and signals and look for a train before proceeding.
- It is illegal and dangerous to go around illegal and dangerous to go around lowered gates.
- Always expect a train.
- If your vehicle gets stuck or stalls at a crossing, get everyone out and far away immediately.
- To report a problem or emergency, call the number on the blue and white Emergency Notification System (ENS) sign on the crossbuck and share the crossing ID number with the dispatcher. (Call 911 if no sign is present.)

For more information

For more information, please contact _____.