

## HOW TO AVOID BECOMING A PEDESTRIAN TRAFFIC STATISTIC

As part of the 20-year planning process, I have been reviewing BACTS-area bicycle and pedestrian accident reports for the years 1994-1999. Did you know that Greater Bangor rates as the most dangerous metropolitan area in Maine for pedestrians? From an examination of the circumstances surrounding each accident, I've compiled a list of dos and don'ts for pedestrians. Please don't become our next statistic!

- 1. Try to cross the street at highly-visible crosswalks.** Crossing the street is the single most dangerous thing a pedestrian can do. However, crossing at crosswalks – and better yet, at signalized crosswalks with a “WALK” phase – increases your chances of being seen and *usually* causes vehicles to stop and let you cross. So if you want to maximize your safety while crossing the road, plan your route so you can use well-marked crosswalks. If that's not an option in your location, be extremely wary of oncoming vehicles and get across as quickly as you can. DON'T assume that traffic will slow or stop for you unless it already has! Which leads to #2...
- 2. Always distrust moving vehicles when crossing the road. If you have any doubt about whether they will stop, don't step out.** Maine State Law requires vehicles to yield to pedestrians in crosswalks. But we have a lot of transplants driving around out there, and our native Mainers don't always pay attention either. DON'T be a traffic vigilante by forcing vehicles to brake sharply to keep from hitting you! You may be in the right, but you don't want to be dead right. Let the police enforce the traffic laws, and keep yourself safe. Make eye contact as you step off the curb and watch for clear signals that the driver will stop for you: return of eye contact, slowing speed, invitational hand gestures (NOT the rude kind!). On multi-lane roads, watch carefully as you step in front of a stopped vehicle to make sure that the rest of the traffic from both directions sees you and stops for you. Right-turn-on-red intersections are another area to watch for inattentive drivers. Again, try to make eye contact before crossing.
- 3. Long shadows = poor visibility.** Some accidents occur because a driver is blinded by the sun and fails to see a pedestrian in the road – especially in early morning and on winter afternoons. Stay off the street until you are sure the driver sees you and is prepared to stop, and always pay attention to the direction of the sun in relation to the roadway.
- 4. If you must walk on the roadway at night, take pains to make yourself visible.** 49% of all BACTS pedestrian accidents occurred in low-light conditions during the study period, and this figure included 71% of all the fatalities. For one thing, drivers (and pedestrians) are more likely to be OUI during the late-night hours -- but the bigger problem is *pedestrian visibility*. Try to avoid situations where you have to walk along roads or cross the street after dark. If that's not possible, make it a point to wear light-colored clothing and consider adding strips of reflective tape (available in hardware stores and bike shops) front and back. It also makes sense to use a flashlight, lantern, or headlamp. Motorists do not expect to see pedestrians out after dark, and many motorists have some degree of vision impairment in low light. So if you must walk along the road after dark, illuminate yourself lavishly.
- 5. Always walk facing traffic.** Actually, you should always walk on the sidewalk if you can – in fact, it's illegal in Maine to walk on the street if a sidewalk is provided. If a

sidewalk is unavailable, always walk facing traffic so you can see oncoming vehicles and have a chance to dive out of the way. The second most common accident type in the BACTS area is getting clipped from behind while walking with traffic. Needless to say, this is especially critical in snow or ice conditions where vehicles may lose traction and skid along the roadway (with reduced visibility as well). Unfortunately, these are the same conditions which block off sidewalks and force pedestrians out onto the street. So if a big storm is blowing, you might just want to sit inside and stay warm and dry until the worst of it is over – but if you're set on going out, then at least walk facing traffic.

**6. Don't drink and walk.** Drunk driving has gotten a lot of press in the past few years, but the majority of area pedestrian accidents from 1994-1999 involved sober drivers hitting tipsy pedestrians. Alcohol and/or drugs can slow your reaction time, lower your situational awareness, and cloud your judgment. "Liquid courage" may lead you to dash across the street in front of that truck – you've got plenty of time! In downtown Bangor (and possibly at other "nightlife" locations in the BACTS area as well), intoxicated pedestrians are sometimes encountered walking or lying in the road during the wee hours; see #4 above. A gentle hint: if you've had too much to drink or you're spaced out on drugs, your life is worth the cost of a cab ride home. Even if you feel only borderline intoxicated, the safest bet is to assume that you shouldn't be walking anywhere near the road.

Walking is a great form of transportation for short trips, and for longer treks as well. Walking provides you with fresh air, healthful exercise, and a chance to observe and interact with your surroundings and with other pedestrians. It can be done at your own pace, alone or with friends, brisk or relaxed according to your mood, and offers a refreshing alternative to the compulsive hustle-bustle of an automotive trip. But like all transportation modes, it requires common sense and constant awareness of one's surroundings. By observing these basic safety principles and teaching them to your children, you can take full advantage of the many wonderful opportunities for walking around our downtowns and surrounding areas.