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[\(Enlarge photo\)](#)

Many crimes against female motorists occur as they are heading to or from their vehicles. *(Photo courtesy of iStockPhoto)*



[\(Enlarge photo\)](#)

Use your cell phone if you're lost, in trouble or want to report a stranded motorist. *(Photo courtesy of iStockPhoto)*



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Women driving alone are at greater risk of becoming crime victims. *(Photo courtesy of iStockPhoto)*

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Women Driving Alone: How To Protect Yourself

Tips To Prevent Carjacking, Abduction and Other Crimes

By Jayne O'Donnell, Contributor

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When you're a woman driving alone, car crashes are far from the only risk you face. Carjacking, abduction and falling prey to a police impersonator all pose additional hazards for women, who are more likely to be targeted by sexual predators. International Association of Chiefs of Police President Ron Ruecker says most crimes involving women drivers occur when they are heading to or away from their cars, particularly in parking lots, where thieves are tempted to steal both cars and property. While it's important not to be overly fearful, it's smart to be on the lookout for trouble and prepared if you're confronted. Here are 10 ways to stay safe when traveling solo.

- 1. Be careful where you park.** Ruecker and other experts recommend finding a well-lit spot or lot, whether it's indoors or out. Avoid spots where few other vehicles are parked. Steer clear of vans, especially commercial models that lack glass side panels, where wrongdoers can hide. Lock your car, and memorize or jot down its location. Pay lots with attendants are less likely to play host to criminals. Also consider letting the attendant know where you're parked as you return to your car: If you don't come through the pay window shortly, he'll know something's wrong.
- 2. Have your keys handy.** Fumbling for keys in a handbag can give a criminal the extra few seconds he needs to pull off a mugging, abduction or carjacking. If your key fob can be programmed to open only the driver-side door, do it. Consider attaching a canister of pepper spray to your keychain. Make sure the car is locked once you are in.
- 3. Pay attention to vehicles near yours.** As you head back to your vehicle, is someone sitting in another vehicle's passenger side, next to where you'll be getting in? Is the vehicle pulling out, or just idling? If it's the latter, back off. This could be trouble.
- 4. Avoid playing Good Samaritan.** This is especially true if you're waved down by a lone man in a remote location whose car seems to have broken down. Use your cell phone to call his location in to the highway patrol or police. They can help him out. Most 911 operators can also connect you quickly to a non-emergency line.
- 5. Think twice about pulling over for an unmarked police car.** If you don't think you've done anything wrong or think the "officer" looks suspicious, call 911 and ask for the local police authority. They should

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be able to tell you whether unmarked cars are patrolling your area. If you're still not sure, turn on your dome light and wave to acknowledge that you see them, says Ruecker. Then drive slowly to a well-lit, populated area — a gas station or convenience store, for example — before pulling to a stop. Don't leave your car or roll down the window. Make the officer show his official identification card. Don't settle for a badge or an official-looking hat — they're easy to find. And make sure he's in uniform and that the uniform parts match. Police departments use unmarked cars but rarely staff them with plainclothes officers for traffic patrols.

- 6. Know where you're going at all times.** Have directions handy whenever you're going somewhere new. Consider keeping a GPS device in your car if it doesn't have a navigation system. You can find [portable navigation systems](#) for less than \$200, and some of the least expensive systems are mounted on sports watches. The device will allow you to be tracked and to call in your precise location if you become lost or just aren't good at reading maps.
- 7. Keep your vehicle well serviced.** A poorly maintained engine can let you down at exactly the wrong time — or place. The same goes for batteries that haven't been charged recently or tested in cold weather. Tires that are long in the tooth and short in the tread can go flat just when they're needed most. Keeping up on your maintenance can go a long way toward avoiding a bad situation.
- 8. Use all of your car's safety and security features.** Read the manual — you may not even know how your car can help protect you. For example, run-flat tires can go up to 150 miles if they spring a leak. General Motors' OnStar and other telematics systems let you call an operator at the first sign of trouble and can be used to pinpoint your location. They also alert police and medical authorities if you are in a serious crash. Several vehicles, including some sold by Chrysler, let you start the engine from outside the car, saving what may be critical time if you're in a bad situation. And several Volvo models have the "Personal Car Communicator," which alerts you through your key fob if the car is left unlocked or has been broken into. When you're buying a new car, factor both vehicle safety *and* personal security options into your decision.
- 9. Have a plan when trouble arises.** If confronted by a potential abductor or carjacker while you're in or around your car, drop your packages and run, while making lots of noise. Experts say most criminals will quit right there. What you want to avoid *at all costs* is going with them to another location, even if they say you won't be hurt. Once you no longer control the situation, you have few options. If you're being followed by another car, head to a police station (call 911 for information on how to get there) or a gas station. If you are driving

and discover someone hiding in your backseat, slam on your brakes to throw them off balance, put the car in park and run.

10. **Always let someone know where you're going.** Frank Scafidi, spokesman for the National Insurance Crime Bureau and a former FBI agent, says when he planned to drive from Sacramento to Chicago last year, he plotted his likely course on a map, marked off overnight stops and times he planned to check in by telephone and gave it to his wife. He recommends that kind of caution for far shorter trips when women are driving alone. The back-up person can alert police quickly if you fail to return on schedule, saving critical time — and perhaps your life.

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