



[Safety Centers](#) | [Safety News](#) | [Safety Products](#) | [Safety Articles](#) | [My Safety](#) | [FREE REGISTRATION](#) | [Site Map](#)

[Temporary Brake Failure](#)

[Brake Questions](#)

[Troubleshooting Brake Problems](#)

[Symptoms of Brake Failure](#)

[Car Brake Failure](#)

[Why Do Brakes Fail](#)

[Car Brake Maintenance](#)

[How to Change Break Fluid](#)

[Brake System Failure](#)

[Statistics on Brake Failure](#)

[Squeaking Brakes](#)

[Spongy Brakes](#)

[Signs of Brake Trouble](#)

[Parking Brake](#)

[No Brakes](#)

Brake Failure

When it comes to vehicle safety, no system is more important than the brakes. They're often the only thing between you and an accident.

Having your brakes fail is one of the most helpless feelings a driver can experience. Fortunately it is very unusual for a vehicle to suffer total brake failure. Most vehicles retain some degree of braking capacity even when there has been a failure of the main system.

Dangerously poor brake performance often is a result of worn brakes and/or lack of maintenance. Be aware of warning signs of potential brake failure:

- Poor braking performance and difficulty stopping the car
- Squeaking or grinding noises when the brakes are applied
- The brakes must be pumped to stop the car or the pedal sinks to the floor
- Your car pulls to one side or the brakes drag or pulse

These symptoms could indicate damage to the system's pads, linings, drums or rotors; a leak or excess air in the lines; low or contaminated brake fluid; or the need for an adjustment.

You can be confident that your car will stop if you take proper care of its braking system through annual brake inspections, maintenance, and repair. In the unlikely event that brake failure occurs, the National Safety Council offers these tips:

- Try not to panic. Work your vehicle into the right lane and then toward the shoulder or, if possible, toward an exit. Remember to use your directional signal. When you reach the right lane turn on your emergency hazard lights.
- Let the car slow down gradually by taking your foot off the gas pedal. Simply steer as your vehicle slows and shift the car into a lower gear to let the engine help slow the car.
- Once off the roadway, shift into neutral and gradually apply the hand brake until the vehicle stops. If that brake has also failed, direct the car onto a soft shoulder or rub the wheel against a curb, which will help you to slow down.
- Get the car off the roadway and to a safe place to avoid stopping traffic or being involved in a rear-end collision.
- When safely off the road, put out reflective triangles beside and behind your vehicle to alert other drivers; keep your emergency flashers going.
- You will need professional assistance. Raise your hood and tie something white to the radio antenna or hang it out the window so police officers or tow truck operators will know you need help.
- Don't stand behind or next to your vehicle; if possible, stay away from the vehicle and wait for help to arrive. Do not be tempted to drive your vehicle, no matter how slowly, without brakes! Call for help to get your disabled vehicle towed.

-- Kenneth Krause

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