

Personal Safety Tips

Virtually all activities in life entail some level of risk, and we each have different attitudes toward risk. At one end of the scale is refusing to engage in an activity by exaggerating the level of risk involved. At the other end is engaging in very risky activities while refusing to take any precautions. Neither of these attitudes is useful for living an empowered life. What is useful is to accurately assess the risks, take those precautions that make sense, and live as fully as possible. The following precautions should be adopted within a cultural/gender context. They will not guarantee safety, but they should serve to minimize criminal opportunities. The Houston Police Department wants you to be safe and strives to provide you with as much safety information as possible. If you have any questions regarding the following Personal Safety information, please contact the Houston Police Department's Community Services Unit at 713-308-3200.

At Home

- Install quality deadbolt locks on all exterior doors and use them.
- A small chain between the door and doorjamb is not very secure. It can be easily broken and defeated.
- Install quality locks on all windows and use them.
- Windows left open for ventilation should not be capable of being opened far enough for entry.
- Install a wide-angle door viewer on all exterior doors.
- Do not use your full name on your mailbox, in the telephone directory, or on your answering machine.
- Minimize the amount of landscaping, shrubbery or other plant growth near windows, doorways, walkways or other possible areas of concealment.
- Have lights at all entrances to the home. Exterior lights – designed for security purposes – should be either activated by motion detector or controlled by a photoelectric cell.
- Do not leave a schedule of your times away from home on your answering machine or discussed amongst people you do not trust.
- Before opening an exterior door to the home, know who is at the door, and do not open the door to an unexpected visitor.
- Do not hide extra keys near an entryway. Criminals are good at finding them.
- Ask for photo identification of utility or repair persons. If you are suspicious or did not call for this service, always call to verify employment before opening your door.
- Never give personal information to telephone solicitors.
- Consider creating a “safe room” within the house. This is often the master bedroom. This room should have a solid door, strong locks and not be easily accessible from the outside. Consider keeping a cellular phone in this room.
- Do not permit strangers into the home to use the telephone. If you want to help a stranger, offer to make the call for them.
- When a package is delivered, ask that the parcel be left outside the door. Receipts that require signature can be slipped under the door.
- Children should be trained not to open the home door for strangers.
- Engrave all of your valuable property. Keep a record of serial numbers of valuable property. Photograph or videotape valuables, A digital camera is particularly good for this purpose. Keep photographs or videotapes of valuables and their serial numbers in a safe or a safe-deposit box.
- Whenever moving into a new residence, have all exterior door locks rekeyed.
- Particularly at night, keep venetian blinds and curtains closed. If possible, leave lights on in two or more rooms to indicate a presence.

Apartments and Condominiums

- Always lock the doors to common areas and garages.
- Never use a laundry room alone or late at night. Do your laundry during the day, preferably when other known persons are in the room.

Telephone Calls

- Do not give your telephone number to wrong telephone callers. Ask the caller, "What telephone number are you calling?"
- Check references of any person calling seeking information about you for a survey, credit check, or subscription drive. Call the agency or company the person works for and verify the identity and intent of the caller.
- Never reveal to a stranger or wrong telephone number caller, your address or that you are home alone.
- Teach children telephone security techniques.
- If you receive a threatening, harassing or obscene telephone call, notify you the Houston Police Department at 713-884-3131. If you receive such a call:
 - Place the telephone receiver down immediately
 - Do not say anything to the caller
 - Keep a record of time, date and content of each telephone call

Away From Home

- Use timing devices to turn on inside lights and radios or TV's to give the appearance that your home is occupied. Set times to go on and off at different hours in different rooms.
- If your home is to be unoccupied for more than one or two days at a time, either stop the newspaper and mail delivery or have a relative, trusted friend or neighbor pick them up.

Returning Home

- Have your door key in hand when approaching your entryway.
- If you are driven home, ask the driver to wait until you are safely inside.
- Never go into your home if anything seems unusual, such as an open door or broken window. Leave immediately and call the police.

Key Control

- Give a duplicate house key to a relative, trusted friend or neighbor in the event you are ever locked out.
- Do not hide house keys near doorways, in planters, under doormats, or other places where they might be easily found.
- Do not place personal identification on key rings.
- Be able to separate your car key from all of your other keys. A detachable key ring can be purchased for this purpose.
- Leave only your ignition key with your car when it is valet parked, serviced or repaired.
- If the keys to your home are lost or misplaced, change the exterior door locks as soon as possible.

Citizen Patrol

- Get to know your neighbors and discuss concerns and ideas to improve security in your neighborhood.
- Join or start a Citizen Patrol group as a method of organizing a network of people interested in working together to improve neighborhood security.
- Exchange work and vacation schedules with a trusted neighbor so that you can keep an eye on each other's home.
- Immediately report any inoperative exterior neighborhood lighting.

On The Street

- Avoid walking alone whenever possible.**
- Never hitchhike! It's not worth the risk!**
- When walking, walk in the middle of the sidewalk and walk facing oncoming traffic.**
- Attempt to appear confident and purposeful when you walk and be alert to your surroundings at all times.**
- Plan and use the safest and most direct route to your destination.**
- If you carry a purse, carry it close to your body, preferably in front. Carry no more money or credit cards than you absolutely need.**
- When walking, try not to overload yourself with packages or other items. Keep your hands as free as possible.**
- When walking, choose busy, well-lighted streets and avoid isolated areas, alleys, vacant lots, abandoned buildings, and construction sites.**
- When walking during hours of darkness, wear light colored clothing and carry a flashlight.**
- Wearing headphones connected to portable radios, cassette or CD players while walking can distract you and make you less sensitive to potential danger.**
- If you carry a purse with a shoulder strap, be prepared to let it go if snatched. Otherwise, you could be knocked down and hurt.**
- A good suggestion for men is to carry a second wallet containing a few dollar bills and old expired credit cards, which are normally destroyed or discarded. If confronted at knife or gunpoint, give the suspect the second wallet and concentrate on a good physical description to help the police in making the arrest.**
- Avoid being on the street alone if you are upset or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.**
- When walking, carry a loud whistle or high-decibel personal alarm. Use them to attract attention or summon help if you feel you are in danger. Carry the whistle or alarm in your hand so you can use it immediately.**
- If followed or threatened by someone who is walking, use your whistle or personal alarm or scream loudly, cross the street and run in the opposite direction.**
- Never wear expensive jewelry or carry large amounts of cash when walking.**

Driving

- Attempt to travel only on busy, well-lighted streets.**
- Keep your motor vehicle in good working order and the gas tank at least half full.**
- When you approach your parked vehicle, visually check the area around the vehicle for any suspicious persons or activity. If you observe anything suspicious, walk to where there are other people and call the police.**
- Always park in visible, well-lighted areas.**
- Have your keys ready when approaching your vehicle to reduce the time needed to enter.**
- When operating your vehicle, keep the doors locked and the windows rolled up.**
- Drive with all the doors locked.**
- Any valuables in your car should be placed in the trunk or otherwise kept out of sight.**
- When stopped at traffic lights or in traffic, allow space between you and the vehicle in front of you so you can drive away if necessary.**
- If someone approaches your vehicle and attempts to enter, blow your horn to attract attention and drive away.**
- Many people consider a cellular telephone to be a good investment in safety.**
- Do not pick up hitchhikers!**
- Do not open your window if someone approaches your vehicle to ask for directions, the time, etc. Keep the door locked.**
- Never leave house keys attached to car keys at service stations or parking facilities.**

- Do not stop for a stranded motorist. Instead, go to the nearest telephone booth and call the police for assistance.
- Criminals sometimes stage a motor vehicle accident known as a “bump and rob.” The motorist is robbed when they exit their vehicle. If you are involved in a minor accident under suspicious circumstances, stay in your vehicle with the doors locked and the windows up and await the police. If you believe you are in possible danger, write down the license plate of the other vehicle involved in the accident and drive to a safe location to report the accident to the police.
- Carry in your car — a flashlight, fix-a-flat, maps, comfortable warm clothing, a portable fire extinguisher, first aid kit, empty gas can, white cloth to tie to door handle or antenna to signal distress and a cellular phone.
- If you are driving somewhere you are not familiar with, plan your route and check a map before you start out.
- Keep spare money in your car for a taxi, bus fare or telephone calls in case of a breakdown.
- If you see another motorist in trouble, do not stop. Signal the motorist you are going to call for help. Use a pay phone or your cellular telephone to call for assistance.
- If you travel a regular route to and from work, make yourself familiar with businesses on the route that stay open late in the event you need emergency assistance.
- Do not allow yourself to become distracted while driving. Resist applying cosmetics, reading or calls on your cell phone when driving.
- When traveling in an unknown area, drive in the lane closest to the center of the roadway. Leave enough space between your vehicle and the one in front of you to enable you to go around it quickly if necessary.

Parking

- Choose well-lighted parking areas.
- Look around for loiterers before getting out of your motor vehicle.
- Always lock valuables and packages out of sight in the vehicle.
- If you get out of your vehicle, always turn off the ignition, remove the key, and lock your vehicle doors, no matter how soon you plan to return. This is particularly important at service stations and convenience stores.
- Try not to park next to vans, large SUV's, pickup trucks or other vehicles whose size and structure can provide concealment.
- Exercise particular caution when using underground or enclosed parking garages. Always try to walk in the center aisle, rather than close to parked cars.
- If you have the choice, park in areas that have an attendant or in locations with heavy pedestrian traffic.

Car Trouble

- If possible, drive to a busy, well-lighted area.
- Set the parking brake and turn on the vehicle's emergency flashers.
- If you have a cellular telephone, use it to summon assistance.
- Wait inside your car with the doors locked and windows closed until a law enforcement officer or other trusted person arrives to assist you.
- If someone you do not know stops and offers to help you do not get out of the car. Communicate with the person through a closed window.
- If you have a flat tire, drive on it until you reach a safe, well-lighted and well-traveled area.
- If your vehicle becomes disabled and help is not immediately available, raise the hood of the vehicle (if you can safely do so), attach a handkerchief to the door handle, and then stay in the vehicle with the doors locked and the windows up. Activate your hazard or parking lights. If someone stops to assist you, through the closed window ask them to call the police.

If Followed While Driving

- Drive to the nearest police or fire station for assistance.
- Drive to an open gasoline station, grocery store or other business where you can safely call the police.
- Keep driving until you find a safe area. While driving, attract attention to your situation while honking the vehicle's horn in rapid short blasts and by turning on the emergency flashers.
- Attempt to obtain the license plate number and a description of the vehicle following you. Do not drive home or pull over to the side of the road or turn into a driveway. You could get trapped.

Public Transportation

- Locate convenient, well-lighted, frequently used bus stops, train, subway stations or taxicab stands.
 - Check public transportation schedules in advance, especially if traveling at odd hours.
 - Do not wait alone at a bus stop, subway, train station or taxicab stand.
 - When boarding a bus, train, or subway have exact change ready.
 - Sit as close to the driver as possible.
 - Beware of overheard conversations. Don't tell anyone on a bus, train or subway where you are going.
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- If you are verbally or physically harassed while on the bus, train or subway, report the incident to the driver or conductor immediately.
 - Be alert to who gets off the bus, train or subway with you. If you feel you are being followed, walk toward other people or to an open business.

At Work

- Become actively involved in working with your employer to improve security in and around you work place.
- If possible, get into the habit of traveling to and from work and parking areas with other people.
- Park in areas that are patrolled and well-lighted after dark.
- Avoid using isolated, deserted stairways in office buildings.
- If a suspicious looking person follows you into an elevator, step out of the elevator immediately.
- If you see a suspicious looking person inside an elevator you are about to enter, do not get in.
- If you are in an elevator and another person makes you feel uncomfortable, get off as soon as possible.
- When using elevators, stand near the control panel by the door so you can easily press the alarm button in an emergency.
- Lock valuables such as a purse, wallet and keys in desk drawers or other secured areas.
- Do not advertise your vacation plans, times you will be away from home or the amount of cash you are carrying.
- Observe security measures when using restrooms in office buildings. If the facilities are locked, never leave the door unlocked or give the key to an unauthorized person. Do not enter the restroom if the lock appears broken or the door is ajar. If the facilities are not kept locked, enter cautiously and check the area thoroughly before closing the door behind you.
- Avoid working late or odd hours if possible. If you must work late or at odd hours, alert a family member, friend or security officer. If possible have a security officer check on you from time to time. Ask a security officer, co-worker or an employee to escort you to your car or to public transportation. Do not walk to your car alone if you can avoid it.
- Report all suspicious persons and activities to security personnel.