

How to escape from a sinking car

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Any car accident is frightening, but an accident in which your vehicle is thrown into the water, with you trapped inside, is absolutely terrifying. Such accidents are particularly dangerous due to the risk of drowning, but the fact is that most deaths that occur from being trapped in a sinking vehicle are avoidable. Escape usually requires only a cool head, a little know-how and, sometimes, patience.

You need to remain as calm as possible, it will get your adrenaline pumping, but try not to panic.

Unfasten your seatbelt.

Try to open your door or window, if the water isn't already up against it. If not break the window, the side and rear windows are tempered which means they will break if struck with a pointed object. Don't bother trying to break out through the windscreen, as it will just crack (letting in more water) and remain in one large piece.

- Keep your head above water. As the vehicle fills with water, you need to make sure you can still breathe. If the car lands upright you may simply be able to remain in your seat, but if the car lands on its top or side, you will have to maneuver within the car to keep your head in the air pocket.
- Escape through a window or open the door as soon as you can. Water will initially flow into the car very quickly, so you may not be able to escape from an open window. Remember to make sure your door is unlocked. In your haste you may think you can't open the door when all you need to do is unlock it.
- Swim to the surface as quickly as possible. Push off the car and swim to the surface. If you don't know which way to swim, look for light and swim toward it or follow any bubbles you see as they will be going up. Be aware of your surroundings as you swim and surface. You may have to deal with a strong current or obstacles such as rocks, concrete bridge supports, or even passing boats. Avoid injuring yourself on these things, and use them to your advantage if you are too injured or exhausted to make it to land once you surface.
- Get medical attention as soon as possible. The adrenaline in your bloodstream after the escape may make you unable to immediately detect any other injuries you may have sustained in the accident.

Tips

- Your clothing and heavy objects in your pockets can make you sink. Be mentally prepared to kick off your shoes and remove heavy outer clothing such as jackets if necessary. The less clothing you have on the easier swimming will be. Even your pants (especially denim) will weigh you down significantly.
- Assist children out of the vehicle before you exit. Children will panic and may need assistance. Because they are smaller, it should be easier to get them out of the car.

- Take control of the situation. If you're traveling with other people, tell them what to do (i.e. unbuckle seat-belts, remain calm, etc.) in order to escape.
- Be prepared. A variety of emergency products are available that can help you break your car window. Some of these are combined with products you already carry in your car, such as flashlights and key rings. Small spring-loaded hammers or punches ("power punches") may provide the easiest and most portable solution, but you could even carry your own hammer. Just make sure your tool is easily accessible at all times.
- If you don't have a special tool to break the windows, use anything you can. Hammers, screwdrivers, and steering wheel locks are very good. You can also elbow the window, or try to kick it out, but you will have to give it all you've got.
- Side and rear windows are the best options for escape. Front windows (windshields) are made with safety glass, which will stick together when broken and which may thus be difficult to remove. Some more expensive cars also use safety glass for the sides.
- The easiest way to break a window is to strike it near a corner or edge.
- Fully recline your seat to make escape and maneuvering inside the vehicle easier. Don't do this if someone is sitting behind you.
- While you almost certainly won't be able to open a door that's at all submerged in the water, it's valuable to note that the end of the car that contains the engine will usually sink fastest, often leaving the car at an angle so that part of it (usually the back) is above water for a while. You may thus be able to open some doors, but not others, while the car is still floating.
- If you can easily do so, remove heavy shoes or bulky clothes while you are in the vehicle. Bulky clothing can get snagged on something, trapping you when you would otherwise be able to escape, and heavy clothes or boots may fill with water and make it difficult to swim to the surface, especially if you're not a strong swimmer.
- Be mindful of all exits from your vehicle to include passage through drop-down back seats and out the trunk using the emergency trunk release handle that is a feature of some newer cars.
- If you have electric doors and windows, if you can, fully lower the windows upon contact with the water before they short out. When the electrical system goes out you may not be able to lower them and the doors will only unlock manually.
- You may be able to open the car door once the car has filled with water because the pressure on the door has equalized. However, you should probably be out of the car long before it fills with water.
- If you have a sunroof, open it and escape through there before the water reaches the top of the car.
- Don't bother turning your lights off- even turn them on if you are unlikely to be able to point out your vehicle or escape from it - the light's electronics are usually waterproofed, and the lights themselves will help rescuers find your vehicle. Electric shock is very unlikely - and almost certainly not dangerous in these situations.

Warnings

- Be careful when breaking the windows, as glass can fly around and you may cut yourself, especially if you need to use your elbow or feet.
- Don't take anything heavy or unnecessary with you, and remember that everything is unnecessary in this situation. If your wallet and cell phone are already in your pockets, you can leave them in there, but don't try to collect other belongings.

- Fluids from the engine that are lighter than water may seep into the car, and the fumes from these can pollute your air pocket. Get out of the vehicle as soon as you can.
- Don't wait for help. Rescuers will most likely not be able to reach you in time, and even if they do, they're usually not much they can do for you. You're on your own.