

Cruise Control in the Rain?

Lowering driving speed on a rainy day is a fairly well accepted practice. But, should cruise control be used? **Don Tyminski, WBCCI # 1477**, says not. In fact, he shares that risk of a major accident is increased if a vehicle hydroplanes while cruise control is engaged. Hydroplaning occurs when driving through an area where the rain puddles deep enough to cause the vehicle's tires to lose contact with the roadway (think water skiing).

Without Cruise Control

When tires hydroplane they slow down since contact with the roadway is required to keep them spinning. Upon exiting the puddle there is a slight tug as the tires reestablish contact with the road and spin up to the speed of the car. Most of us have experienced this phenomenon with the driver's foot manually feeding the fuel (as opposed to being on cruise control). Whether the driver keeps his foot steady on the fuel, lifts his foot slightly, or totally takes it off the fuel, a calm, non-panic approach (don't hit the brakes) will generally be safe since most hydroplaning is over a relatively short distance of roadway.

With Cruise Control

If cruise control is on it is electronically feeding the fuel. That means the car is maintaining a constant speed by cruise control. It does this by monitoring wheel speed sensors for the driver-selected speed. When wheel revolutions decrease, as when starting up a hill, the cruise control is programmed to increase the fuel feed at the accelerator or accelerator linkage so that the revolutions increase back to the selected speed.

When hydroplaning through a puddle the wheel revolutions decrease and the cruise control increases fuel flow rapidly to bring the car back to the selected speed — not desirable when hydroplaning. If the selected speed is measured at the non-driven wheels, more and more fuel gets fed to the engine in a pedal-to-the-floor-board acceleration. Since the driven wheels are receiving more and more fuel they accelerate rapidly, spinning on the film of water beyond your original road speed.

When the tires reestablish contact with the roadway, the car accelerates forward rapidly for a brief moment in time. The sudden acceleration is subject to causing a loss of vehicle control. If the steering wheel has been turned slightly it could unexpectedly move you off the road or into a parallel or on-coming lane of traffic with tragic consequences. The same circumstances are found with ice or snow as well as rain. So it is best to use cruise control only on dry roadways.