



Safety Spotlight FAQs

Traffic Signal Operations



Traffic signals help organize movement for drivers, pedestrians, and bicyclists. This answers questions most often raised about how they work and what drivers should expect.

Q: What happens if the signal is not working?

A: When a traffic signal is not operating, and all signal heads are dark, Florida law requires drivers to treat the intersection as an all-way stop. Each driver must stop at the stop line, before the crosswalk, or before entering the intersection. Drivers should then look in all directions and yield to any users who entered the intersection first, including pedestrians, bicycles, and side-street traffic. After confirming that all lanes are clear and that it is safe, the driver may proceed cautiously. If any portion of the signal is working, such as flashing red or flashing yellow, drivers must follow the meaning of that indication. When law enforcement or authorized personnel are present, their instructions override normal rules of the road. Drivers should also report the outage to the responsible agency so that repairs can be made promptly.

Q: Why don't I get a green light when no one else is around?

A: Most signals rely on vehicle detection. If a vehicle stops outside the detection zone—either too far forward or too far back—the signal may not recognize that a car is waiting. Signal timing plans and coordination can also affect how quickly a green appears.

Q: Why do I sometimes wait so long at a red light?

A: Traffic signals use different operating plans depending on location and time of day. Some signals respond directly to vehicles that arrive at the intersection, while others operate on a preset pattern to help traffic flow smoothly along a corridor. When a signal is operating in coordination with others nearby, it may not change immediately, even if no cross traffic is visible. This helps reduce stops and delays for larger traffic movements, but it may result in a short wait when traffic is light. Pedestrian phases, left-turn arrows, and detection needs also affect wait times.

Q: When can I turn right on red?

A: After stopping and ensuring it is safe, unless a "NO TURN ON RED" sign is posted.

Q: What does a red arrow mean?

A: You must stop and remain stopped in the direction of the arrow. A right turn on a red arrow is allowed only when signs do not prohibit it, and the turn is safe. A left turn on red is allowed only when turning from a one-way street onto another one-way street that carries traffic to the left.

Q: Why do some intersections have left-turn arrows?

A: Protected left-turn arrows are installed when engineering studies show that crash patterns, visibility, opposing traffic, or turn volumes justify them. A left-turn arrow can improve safety but may also increase overall delay, so it is used only when needed.

Q: What do pedestrian signal indications mean?

A: **WALK:** Begin crossing after checking for turning vehicles. **Flashing DON'T WALK:** Do not start crossing. If already in the crosswalk, continue to the other side. **Steady DON'T WALK:** Do not enter the crosswalk. **Countdown** timers show how many seconds remain.

Q: Why do some pedestrian crossings require pushbuttons?

A: Pedestrian crossings operate differently depending on how the signal is programmed. At some intersections, pedestrian crossing time is included automatically in every signal cycle, known as pre-timed operation, so pedestrians may cross without pressing a button. Some locations also use a Leading Pedestrian Interval (LPI), which gives pedestrians a brief head start before vehicles receive a green light. At other intersections, especially where pedestrian activity is less frequent, a pushbutton is required to tell the signal that someone wants to cross. This allows the signal to provide crossing time only when needed while still operating efficiently when no pedestrians are present.