

STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE · SAN DIEGO

How to Get a Driver's License in San Diego: 2026 Guide

For San Diego newcomers, green card and visa holders, and drivers arriving with a foreign license: California's DMV process, tests and fees.

SHORT ANSWER

Once you establish California residency, you can drive on your previous license for only 10 days (California Vehicle Code section 12505). The knowledge test is offered in English, Spanish, Armenian, Chinese, Farsi, Punjabi, Russian, Tagalog, Vietnamese and American Sign Language; Turkish is not one of them. California has no license-exchange agreement with any country, so a Turkish license does not convert directly. The license fee is \$46. San Diego County has nine DMV field offices; use the official locator to find the closest one.

Before you start

- **The deadline is short: 10 days.** California Vehicle Code section 12505 lets a new resident drive on an out-of-state license for at most 10 days after establishing residency.
- **No exchange agreement with Türkiye, or with any country.** A Turkish license does not convert to a California one. You apply as a first-time applicant: knowledge test, vision test, and a road test if required.
- **The knowledge test is not offered in Turkish.** DMV's official sample knowledge test page lists only English, Spanish, Armenian, Chinese, Farsi, Punjabi, Russian, Tagalog, Vietnamese and American Sign Language.
- **Visitors are different.** If you have not established California residency, for example as a tourist or short-term visitor, you may drive on a valid foreign license. The 10-day clock starts the moment you become a resident.
- **REAL ID costs the same as a standard license.** Since May 7, 2025, domestic flights and entry to federal buildings require a REAL ID or a passport. There is no extra fee for REAL ID.

Step by step

- 1 **Find a DMV office and book an appointment.** San Diego County has nine field offices, see the table below. Locator and appointments: dmv.ca.gov.
- 2 **Gather your documents.** Proof of identity and lawful presence, your Social Security number, and two documents showing your California address.
- 3 **Complete the application and pay the fee.** \$46.
- 4 **Take the vision test.**

- 5 **Take the knowledge test.** Traffic laws and signs, in English, Spanish or one of DMV's other listed languages.
- 6 **Take the road test if required,** in an insured, registered vehicle.

Fees (2026)

ITEM	FEE
Driver's license (original or renewal)	\$46
ID card	\$40
Reduced-fee ID card	\$11
Replacement or information change	\$37
Driving retest fee	\$9
Commercial license (Class A/B, original)	\$100

Card payments carry a service fee of roughly 1.95% to 2.1% depending on the channel. Cash is accepted in person only.

Standard license, REAL ID, or AB 60?

- **REAL ID:** valid for domestic flights and federal buildings, same fee as a standard license. You need proof of identity (for example a passport), your SSN, and two documents showing your California address.
- **Standard license:** available if you can prove lawful presence in the U.S., but it alone is not enough for domestic flights or federal buildings.
- **AB 60 license:** for people who cannot prove lawful presence but can prove identity and California residency. It is not REAL ID compliant and cannot be used as federal ID.

NOTE FOR IMMIGRANTS

- The 10-day window is very tight. Book your DMV appointment the moment you establish residency.
- An International Driving Permit does not replace a California license; it only helps as an English translation, though rental car companies may ask for one.
- If a form asks about your citizenship or immigration status, answer truthfully; a false statement can have serious consequences.

San Diego-area DMV offices

San Diego County has nine DMV field offices: the three main ones below, plus two offices in El Cajon, and one each in Poway, San Marcos, Oceanside and San Ysidro, along with quick-transaction kiosks at select grocery stores (Ralphs, Vons, Food 4 Less, Albertsons).

OFFICE	ADDRESS · HOURS
San Diego (Normal Street, main office)	3960 Normal Street, San Diego, CA 92103 · Mon-Tue 8am-5pm, Wed 9am-5pm, Thu-Fri 8am-5pm, closed weekends
San Diego Clairemont	4375 Derrick Drive, San Diego, CA 92117
Chula Vista	30 N Glover Avenue, Chula Vista, CA 91910

For the other six offices (El Cajon x2, Poway, San Marcos, Oceanside, San Ysidro), use the [dmv.ca.gov office locator](https://dmv.ca.gov/office_locator). With only 10 days to work with, check the official scheduler as soon as your documents are ready; wait times vary a lot from office to office and change constantly.

Driving on a Turkish license

- **Visitors:** you may drive on a valid Turkish license as long as you have not established California residency (California Vehicle Code section 12502).
- **New residents:** get a California license within 10 days of establishing residency. There is no test exemption.
- **Renting a car:** rental companies may ask for an International Driving Permit.

Common mistakes

- Ignoring the 10-day window and applying too late.
- Assuming the knowledge test is offered in Turkish and showing up unprepared.
- Assuming a Turkish license can be exchanged without testing.
- Defaulting to the central Normal Street office without checking whether Chula Vista, Clairemont, El Cajon, Poway, San Marcos, Oceanside or San Ysidro is closer.



TURKISH-SPEAKING IMMIGRATION ATTORNEY IN SAN DIEGO

Have a question about your immigration status?

Attorney Asim Clinch serves clients in San Diego and the surrounding area, in Turkish and English.

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