Speed limits are regulated by a memorandum from the Ministry of Transport and communications to the Finnish Road Administration. Translated excerpts from the memorandum are presented below.

2. APPLICABLE SPEED LIMIT SYSTEM

The current speed limit system permanently applicable to all of Finland’s streets and roads comprises specific and local speed limits and general speed limits set in Section 25 of the Finnish Road Traffic Act.

Specific speed limits are limits that apply to a whole specific road, where the maximum speed is set for each section of road according to the prevalent road, traffic and environment conditions. Specific speed limits cover all of Finland’s most trafficked roads that form a continuous road network. The limits are 120, 100, 80 and 60 km/h, and in exceptional cases 70, 50, 40 and 30 km/h. Speed limits are indicated with traffic signs.

Local speed limits refer to limits set for road sections that do not belong to the sphere of specific speed limits on the basis of local conditions. The limit maximum is 60 km/h for urban areas and 80 km/h outside urban areas. Speed limits are indicated with traffic signs.

General speed limits are limits that apply on all streets and roads for which there are no specific or local speed limits. The limit maximum is 50 km/h for urban areas and 80 km/h outside urban areas. The boundaries between general speed limits at the edges of urban areas are indicated with urban area signs. Other traffic signs are only used to indicate general speed limits when a general speed limit area starts at the end of a different speed limit.

In addition to these permanent speed limits, there are also specific and local temporary limits. These limits can be fixed-term, variable or temporary speed limits.

Fixed-term speed limits are lower limits that are set for a period each year due to regularly reappearing causes. Such limit restrictions are set due to abnormal conditions (e.g. busy tourist traffic).
Winter speed limits are fixed-term speed limits that are set for the autumn and winter periods. They only apply to a part of the road network. The speed limits to be lowered are generally 120 km/h and 100 km/h. Winter speed limits of 80 km/h can be indicated in the same way as general 80 km/h speed limits, without recurring signage.

3.3 General Speed Limits

General speed limits apply on all roads and road sections that do not have other speed limits. The general speed limit is 50 km/h for urban areas and 80 km/h outside urban areas. Usually most of the roads in an urban area come under the general 50 km/h speed limit. General speed limits are supplemented by other individual speed limits or speed limit areas set locally due to local conditions.

The general 80 km/h speed limit usually applies to lightly trafficked rural roads and local roads outside of urban areas. Depending on the roads’ technical standards, the speed limits applied to these roads are generally a maximum of 80 km/h, sometimes significantly lower. The general speed limit also usually applies to such highly trafficked roads of a high technical standard for which an 80 km/h limit is suitable.
SPEED LIMITS in wintertime and darkness IN FINLAND

Motorways:

All 120 km/h -limits are lowered to 100 km/h. (Besides 120 km/h -motorways there are some with 100 km/h -limit all year round)

Other roads:

On the other roads most 100 km/h -limits are lowered to 80 km/h. According to the orders of the Ministry of Transportation and Communications, speed limit 100 km/h may be kept unchanged on certain circumstances (the orders were a compromise; the original plan was to lower all 100 km/h – limits on one carriageway roads)

Speed limit 100 km/h may be used in wintertime, when the opposite driving directions are separated. It may also be used if the road is equipped with variable signs (depending on weather, road conditions and lightness) or has exceptionally broad lanes (5,25 - 5,5 m). In the Northern Finland the speed limit 100 km/h may be used on technically good roads with small traffic volume (annual daily traffic less than 3000). All 100 km/h -roads must have a good traffic safety. In wintertime most 100 km/h -roads are in Oulu and Lappland regions (small traffic volume) and some in South Finland, too (motorways and semi motorways).

Speed limits 80 km/h may be lowered to 70 or 60 km/h in wintertime due to special reasons like plentiful heavy traffic and roadside settlement on those road sections.

The period:

The period with the lowered limits is at least 4 months every winter (Nov, Dec, Jan, Feb) The maximum length is 7 months, including Oct, March and Apr. The criteria for 80 km/h -period is the geographical position of the roads, the length of darkness and winter conditions and the quality standard of road maintenance. The changing of speed limit signs takes a couple of days.

The influence on speeds:

The difference in the average speeds between summer and winter is about 10 km/h. Appr. half of this is caused by the lowered limit. The average speeds on the roads with 80 km/h -limits are normally a few kilometres per hour higher than the limit.

The influence on accidents:

The result of the very first experiment (4000 km) was that the change of limit decreased accidents by 14 %. Later, the follow up study with more roads gave the result that the lowered speed limits decreased the number of injury accidents by 28% and the number of fatal accidents by 36 % on the average.

The opinions:
About 2/3 of drivers say that seasonally changing speed limits are useful in Finland. Limits may be harmful, too, if the weather is fine and there is no snow on the road. The opinions of winter speed limits have turned more positive within last years.