



Checklist and Tips for Safe Winter Driving

Know Your Car

Every vehicle handles differently; this is particularly true when driving on wet, icy, or snowy roads. Take time now to learn how to best handle your vehicle under winter weather driving conditions.

- Before moving your car, clean snow, ice or dirt from the windows, the forward sensors, headlights, tail lights and backup camera.
- Practice cold weather driving when your area gets snow — but not on a main road. Until you've sharpened your winter weather driving skills and know how your vehicle handles in snowy conditions, it's best to practice in an empty parking lot in full daylight.
- For electric or hybrid-electric vehicles, minimize the drain on the batteries. If the vehicle has a thermal heating pack for the batteries, plug your vehicle in whenever it's not in use. Pre-heat the passenger compartment before you unplug it in the morning.
- When renting a car you should become familiar with the vehicle before driving it off the lot. Know the location of the hazard lights in case of emergency, and take a minute to review the owner's manual so that you're prepared for any of the various driving situations that may arise.

Plan Your Travel and Route

Keep yourself and others safe by planning ahead before you venture out into bad weather.

- Check the weather, road conditions, and traffic. Plan to leave early if necessary.
- Don't rush! Allow plenty of time to get to your destination safely.
- Familiarize yourself with directions and maps before you go, even if you use a GPS system, and let others know your route and anticipated arrival time.

Stock Your Vehicle

Carry items in your vehicle to handle common winter driving-related tasks, such as cleaning off your windshield, as well as any supplies you might need in an emergency. Keep the following on hand:

- Snow shovel, broom, and ice scraper.
- Abrasive material such as sand or kitty litter, in case your vehicle gets stuck in the snow.
- Jumper cables, flashlight, and warning devices such as flares and emergency markers.
- Blankets for protection from the cold.
- A cell phone with charger, water, food, and any necessary medicine (for longer trips or when driving in lightly populated areas).

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Get Your Car Serviced Now

No one wants their car to break down in any season, but especially not in cold or snowy winter weather. Start the season off right by ensuring your vehicle is in optimal condition.

- Visit your mechanic for a tune-up and other routine maintenance.
- Have your entire vehicle checked thoroughly for leaks, badly worn hoses, or other needed parts, repairs, and replacements.

Check Your Battery

When the temperature drops, so does battery power. For gasoline or diesel engines, it takes more battery power to start your vehicle in cold weather. For electric and hybrid-electric vehicles, the driving range is reduced and the battery systems work better after they warm up. Make sure your battery is up to the challenges of winter by:

- Having your mechanic check your battery for sufficient voltage, amperage and reserve capacity.
- Having the charging system and belts inspected.
- Replacing the battery or making system repairs, including simple things like tightening the battery cable connections.
- Making sure to keep fresh gasoline in a hybrid-electric vehicle, to support the gasoline engine.

Check Your Cooling System

When coolant freezes it expands. This expansion can potentially damage your vehicle's engine block. Don't let this happen to your vehicle this winter. You should:

- Make sure you have enough coolant in your vehicle and that it's designed to withstand winter temperatures.
- See your vehicle owner's manual for specific recommendations on coolant. A 50/50 mix of coolant to water is sufficient to avoid freezing in most regions of the country.
- Thoroughly check the cooling system for leaks or have your mechanic do it for you.
- Drain and replace the coolant in your vehicle at the manufacturer's recommended interval, to remove dirt and rust particles that can clog the cooling system and cause it to fail. Have the coolant tested for proper mix, proper pH (acidity) and strength of the built-in corrosion inhibitors. Over time, the rust inhibitors in antifreeze break down and become ineffective.

Fill Your Windshield Washer Reservoir

You can go through a lot of windshield wiper fluid fairly quickly in a single snowstorm, so be prepared for whatever might come your way.

- Completely fill your vehicle's reservoir before the first snow hits.
- Use high-quality "winter" fluid with de-icer.
- Buy extra to keep in your vehicle.

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Check Your Windshield Wipers and Defrosters

Safe winter driving depends on achieving and maintaining the best visibility possible.

- Make sure your windshield wipers work; replace worn blades.
- Consider installing heavy-duty winter wipers if you live in an area that gets a lot of snow and ice.
- Check to see that your window defrosters (front and rear) work properly.

Verify Floor Mat Installation to Prevent Pedal Interference

Improperly installed floor mats in your vehicle may interfere with the operation of the accelerator or brake pedal, increasing the risk of a crash. To ensure safe operation of your vehicle:

- Remove old floor mats before the installation of new mats.
- Never stack mats.
- Be sure to follow the manufacturer's instructions for mat installation. Using available retention clips to secure the mat will prevent it from sliding forward.
- Use mats that are the correct size and fit for the vehicle. Whenever the mats have been removed for any reason, verify that the driver's mat has been reinstalled correctly.

Inspect Your Tires

If you plan to use snow tires, have them installed before a snow storm hits. Check out www.safercar.gov for tire ratings before buying new ones.

Regardless of season, inspect your tires at least once a month and before long road trips. It only takes about five minutes. If you find yourself driving under less-than-optimal road conditions this winter, you'll be glad you took the time.

- Check tire pressure and make sure each tire is filled to the vehicle manufacturer's recommended inflation pressure, which is listed in your owner's manual and on a placard located on the driver's side door frame or rear edge of the driver's door. The correct pressure is NOT the number listed on the tire. Properly inflated tires ensure optimum tire performance and load carrying capacity.
- Don't forget to check your spare tire. If you need to use your spare tire, you don't want to find out that it is flat.
- Keep a tire pressure gauge in your vehicle at all times and check pressure when tires are "cold" — meaning they haven't been driven on for at least three hours.
- Look closely at your tread and replace tires that have uneven wear or insufficient tread. Tread should be at least 1/16 of an inch or greater on all tires.
- Check the age and overall condition of the tire. Tire rubber degrades over time, so older tires may need to be replaced even if they haven't seen much wear. Look for the tire identification number on the sidewall of the tire, which begins with the letters "DOT." The last four digits represent the week and year the tire was manufactured. Some manufacturers recommend that tires be replaced every six years regardless of use, but check your owner's manual to find out.

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Stay Vigilant While Driving

- Keep your gas tank close to full, even with a hybrid-electric vehicle. If you get stuck in a traffic jam or in snow, you might need more fuel than you anticipated to get home or to keep warm.
- If road conditions are hazardous, avoid driving if possible. Wait until road and weather conditions improve before venturing out in your vehicle.

Driving in Winter Conditions

- Drive slowly. It's harder to control or stop your vehicle on a slick or snow-covered surface. On the road, increase your following distance enough so that you'll have plenty of time to stop for vehicles ahead of you.
- A word of caution about braking: Know what kind of brakes your vehicle has and how to use them properly. In general, if you have antilock brakes, apply firm, continuous pressure. If you don't have antilock brakes, pump the brakes gently.
- If you find yourself in a skid, stay calm and ease your foot off the gas while carefully steering in the direction you want the front of your vehicle to go. This steering maneuver may require additional counter-steering before you can regain full control of the vehicle. Continue to stay off the pedals (gas and brake) until you are able to regain control of your vehicle.

Protect Yourself and Your Loved Ones

- Remember to always wear your seat belt. Ensure that everyone else in your vehicle is buckled up in age- and size-appropriate restraints. Remember that children under age 13 should be properly restrained in the back seat.
- Do not text or engage in any other activities that may distract you while driving.
- While thick outerwear will keep your children warm, it can also interfere with the proper harness fit of your child in his/her car seat. Instead place blankets around your child after the harness is snug and secure.
- Never leave your child unattended in or around your vehicle.
- Always remember to lock your vehicle when exiting so children do not play or get trapped inside.

What To Do in a Winter Emergency

If you are stopped or stalled in wintry weather, follow these safety rules:

- Stay with your car and don't overexert yourself.
- Put bright markers on the antenna or windows and keep the interior dome light turned on.
- To avoid asphyxiation from carbon monoxide poisoning, don't run your car for long periods of time with the windows up or in an enclosed space. If you must run your vehicle, clear the exhaust pipe of any snow and run it only sporadically — just long enough to stay warm.

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Navigating Around Snow Plows

- Don't crowd a snow plow or travel beside it. Snow plows travel slowly, make wide turns, stop often, overlap lanes, and exit the road frequently.
- The road behind an active snow plow is safer to drive on. If you find yourself behind a snow plow, stay behind it or use caution when passing.
- When you are driving behind a snow plow, don't follow or stop too closely. A snow plow operator's field-of-vision is limited; if you can't see the mirrors, the driver can't see you. Also, materials used to de-ice the road could hit your vehicle.
- Snow plows can throw up a cloud of snow that can reduce your visibility to zero in less time than you can react. Never drive into a snow cloud – it can conceal vehicles or hazards.