

Winter Driving Safety

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the leading cause of death during winter storms is transportation accidents. Preparing your vehicle for the winter season and knowing how to react if you find yourself stranded or lost on the road are the keys to safe winter driving.

Preparation Tips

- **Winterize your car.** Check your car battery, ignition system, thermostat, lights, flashers, exhaust, heater, brakes, defroster and tires. Ensure that your car has adequate antifreeze, windshield washer fluid and oil and check regularly throughout the season. A mechanic can help determine if your car is ready for winter driving, and can help to identify potential issues before they become full-blown problems.
- **Install good winter tires.** Make sure the tires have adequate tread. All-weather radials are usually adequate for most winter conditions. Find out if your area required that all vehicles be equipped with chains or snow tires with studs.
- **Prepare for snow and ice.** Keep a windshield scraper and small broom in your car for ice and snow removal. You may want to consider keeping a small shovel in the trunk in case you need to dig out your vehicle.
- **Fill up often.** Maintain at least a half tank of gas during the winter season. You never know when you may find yourself in an unfamiliar area or stranded due to weather.
- **Plan long trips carefully.** Listen to the radio or call the state highway patrol for the latest road conditions. Always travel during daylight, keep others informed of your schedule and route, and stay on main roads. If possible, take at least one other person. Avoid driving during a winter storm warning or blizzard warning.
- **Bring a mobile phone.** Make sure that you have a mobile phone with you if you must travel during a winter storm. Many companies sell prepaid phones and plans; consider purchasing one of these phones and leaving it in your vehicle for use in emergencies only.

Creating a Winter Car Kit

A winter car kit can be an invaluable asset to have if you do find yourself stranded in bad weather. You may want to consider creating a kit that contains the following items:

- Flashlights with extra batteries
- First aid kit with a pocket knife
- Necessary medications

- Several blankets or sleeping bags
- Extra newspapers for insulation
- Plastic bags (for sanitation)
- Matches and candles
- Mittens, socks and other warm clothing
- Small sack of sand for generating traction under wheels
- Small shovel
- Small tools (pliers, wrench, screwdriver)
- Booster cables
- Set of tire chains or traction mats
- Brightly colored cloth to use as a flag
- Snacks like nuts or dried fruit
- Bottled water

If You Become Stranded

Use the following safety tips if you find yourself stranded in your car during a winter storm:

- **Stay in the car.** Do not leave the car to search for assistance unless help is visible within a safe distance. You may become disoriented and lost in blowing and drifting snow. If you must leave the car, follow the road and take shelter at the first building you come across.
- **Display a trouble sign.** Turn on your hazard lights, hang a brightly colored cloth on the radio antenna and raise the hood. Try to make your vehicle as visible as possible to alert rescue teams or other motorists. Turn on the inside dome light so rescue teams can see you at night, but be careful not to run the battery down.
- **Occasionally run the engine.** Turn on the car's engine for about 10 minutes each hour to stay warm. Turn on the heater when the car is running.
- **Beware of carbon monoxide poisoning.** Keep the exhaust pipe clear of snow, and open a downwind window slightly for ventilation.
- **Watch for signs of frostbite and hypothermia.** A loss of feeling and a white or pale appearance in fingers, toes, or nose and ear lobes are symptoms of frostbite. Symptoms of hypothermia include uncontrollable shivering, slow speech, memory lapses, frequent stumbling, drowsiness, and exhaustion. If frostbite or hypothermia is suspected, seek immediate medical assistance.
- **Do minor exercises to keep up circulation.** Clap your hands and move your arms and legs occasionally. Try not to stay in one position for too long. If more than one person is in the car, take turns sleeping.
- **Try to stay warm.** Huddle together with other passengers for warmth. Use newspapers, maps and even the removable car mats for added insulation. Anything that can keep you covered will help to trap in heat.
- **Avoid overexertion.** Cold weather puts an added strain on the heart. Unaccustomed exercise such as shoveling snow or pushing a car can bring on a heart attack or make other medical conditions worse.

Resources

- Federal Emergency Management Agency: www.fema.gov
- NOAA's National Weather Service: <http://weather.gov>
- U.S. Department of Transportation: www.dot.gov
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health: www.nlm.nih.gov

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