

Driving in winter? Be prepared and stay safe

Avoid cold weather driving disasters with these tips

Auto Insurance

[f](#) [🐦](#) [▶](#) [in](#)

Snow, sleet, ice and below freezing temperatures all have an effect on driving conditions. During winter, safety depends on driver performance in winter hazards, good vehicle maintenance—and common sense. These tips will help you and your car weather the winter.

Prepare your car—and yourself—for winter driving conditions

Be prepared for driving in inclement and freezing weather. Start with these suggestions.

- **Understand how your car behaves in the snow.** While features like anti-lock brakes and all-weather tires can be advantageous, every car performs differently. If possible, practice stopping, starting and turning in a big, empty, snowy parking lot to get the feel of your wheels in the snow.
- **Make sure your battery is charged and working optimally.** Cold weather adversely affects battery performance, so check it before the temperature drops.
- **Be sure to keep your gas tank full.** Stormy weather or traffic delays may force you to change routes or turn back. A fuller gas tank will also prevent your car's gas-line from freezing.
- **Change your oil filter and maybe your oil.** The oil in your car thickens in cold weather and (depending on the manufacturer's recommendations for your vehicle) a thinner grade of oil will help your car run more smoothly in the winter.
- **Make sure your wiper fluid contains anti-freeze,** so the spray doesn't freeze up in cold weather. Consider buying winter wiper blades, which prevent ice and snow from hardening on the wiper.
- **Keep windshield and windows clear.** Keep a snowbrush and scraper in your vehicle at all times. Your car's defroster can be supplemented by wiping the windows with a clean cloth to improve visibility.
- **Make sure that your tires have good tread and keep them properly inflated**—both are essential to safe winter driving. And while all-weather tires are sufficient for some, if the conditions in your area tend towards snow and ice, consider winterizing your car with snow tires.
- **Check your exhaust pipe to make sure it is clear.** A blocked pipe could cause a leakage of carbon monoxide gas into your car when the engine is running.
- **Pack your trunk for emergencies.** A snow shovel and a bag of salt (or kitty litter) will help you dig your wheels out of a ditch and give them traction on snow or ice; a blanket will keep you warm and bottles of water will keep you hydrated in case you get stuck.

Plan your trip with common sense

A bad weather accident can happen whether you're on a two-hour drive or a short hop to a dentist appointment. Take precautions before starting your ride.

- **Allow extra time to arrive at your destination.** Trips can take longer during winter than other

times of the year, especially if you encounter storm conditions or icy roads. And driving in inclement weather is stressful enough without the added pressure of being late, which might cloud your safe driving judgment.

- **Don't warm up your car vehicle in an enclosed area, such as a garage.** This can cause toxic carbon monoxide to build up.
- **Fully charge your cellphone and make sure to have your car charger** in case you're running late or need to phone help if you get stuck or have an emergency. But avoid the temptation of using the phone while driving, as it can be a **dangerous distraction**. Always pull over if you need to make the call.
- **Monitor the weather conditions before beginning your trip**, not just at your departure point but also at your destination. If it seems like the roads will be too hazardous, say if an ice storm, hurricane, tornado, flood, hail or other severe weather is expected anywhere on the route you are taking, change your travel plans.

Drive *extra* carefully

“Failure to keep in proper lane or running off the road” and “driving too fast for conditions” are the two of **the most frequent poor driver behaviors**, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Bad weather makes these behaviors exponentially more dangerous, so take additional precautions on the road.

- **Drive slowly** because accelerating, stopping and turning all take longer on snow-covered or icy roads.
- **Leave more distance than usual between your vehicle and the one just ahead of you** to give yourself at least 10 seconds to come to a complete stop. Cars and motorcycles usually need a minimum of 3 seconds to halt completely even when traveling on dry pavement.
- **Be careful when driving over bridges** and roadways that aren't exposed to sunlight—they are often icy when other areas are not.
- **Know your route and be especially alert** to avoid sudden stops and quick direction changes, which might cause spinouts or collisions with cars on slippery roads.
- **Be alert to animals** that are often bolder in their hunt for food when there is snow on the ground and wander on or near roads. Around known habitats, take **steps to avoid collisions with deer** or other animals.
- **Don't activate your cruise control** when driving on a slippery surface. You want to maintain full control of your vehicle.

If you *do* get caught in a storm

Sometimes, despite best efforts, you'll find yourself driving in bad weather. In that case:

- **Stay tuned to weather reports and weather-related accidents** on your radio or GPS. Change routes to avoid the worst of the storm or its havoc.
- **Don't try to drive your way out of it.** Seek shelter for both yourself and your car and wait for the storm to pass.

Next steps: Concerned about safety? Here's [how to shop for a safe car](#).

[Back to top](#)

You May Also Like

Background on: Alcohol-impaired driving

|

Steps to take after an auto accident