Tips for Safe Winter Driving

Safety Talk

What’s at Stake

Once the snow starts to fall, our driving skills are pushed to the limit. Do you know how to drive properly in winter conditions? A few moments spent thinking about it now could save you from problems later when you’re out on the road.

What’s the Danger

Driving requires care and caution year-round. But winter driving has even greater challenges because of wet and icy road surfaces, longer hours of darkness and poor visibility due to snow, rain and fog.

Example

A 17-year-old male Marine Reserve recruit was a passenger in a vehicle that went out of control as it attempted to pass a large truck. At the time of the incident, the two-lane highway was snow-packed and icy, and had a posted speed limit of 55 mph (89 kph).

When the driver moved the car into the other lane to pass the truck, he realized there was oncoming traffic and immediately tried to steer the vehicle back into his lane. But the car began to slide on the icy road, positioning itself crossways, where it was struck on the passenger side by an oncoming vehicle. The young reserve recruit was pronounced dead at the scene.

Witnesses estimate that prior to the collision, both vehicles were going the posted speed limit.

How to Protect Yourself

1. Before starting your trip, check the current road conditions and weather forecast for the areas you will be traveling.
2. Leave lots of time so you’re not rushing to get to your destination. Try to travel during daylight only and consider delaying your trip if the weather’s bad. Let someone know your route and planned arrival time.
3. Maintain a safe following distance. It takes longer to stop on a slippery road. Look ahead and keep plenty of distance between you and other cars (at least four seconds).
4. Drop your speed to match road conditions. The posted speed is the maximum speed under ideal conditions. In winter, it’s safer to drive below the posted speed. No matter how much experience you have, you can’t always predict how your car will move on snow or ice.
5. Watch for black ice, a thin coating of ice that’s almost invisible but very dangerous. It can cause your vehicle to suddenly lose traction, braking and cornering control. Slow down when approaching shaded areas, bridges and overpasses as these sections of road freeze sooner than others in cold weather.
6. Accelerate and brake slowly. When starting from a stop on slick roads, start slowly and accelerate gradually to maintain traction and avoid spinning your wheels. When stopping, plan well in advance, apply the brakes gently and slowly add pressure rather than braking suddenly.
7. Avoid sudden moves. Slow down and steer smoothly and gradually to avoid skidding. Accelerate gently, turn slowly and brake carefully and early. Avoid unexpected quick movements that could put you in a spin. Anticipate turns, stops and lane changes well before they occur.
8. Know how to handle a skid. A skid happens when your wheels slide out of control on a slippery surface and is a result of driving too fast for road conditions. If you start to skid, ease off the brake or accelerator, look and steer smoothly in the direction you want to go. Be careful not to over-steer. If you’re on ice and skidding in a straight

line, step on the clutch or shift to neutral.

9. See and be seen. It’s critical for drivers to see and be seen in low light conditions and when blowing snow impairs visibility. Always drive with your headlights on.
10. Be extremely cautious when approaching highway maintenance vehicles such as snow plows and salt or sand trucks. Maintain a safe following distance. These vehicles throw up snow and spray, making it difficult to see.

Final Word

Winter driving can be challenging. Take your time and plan ahead.