Driving in Winter



What’s at Stake?

Winter driving is hazardous at the best of times, but slippery roads and reduced traction can make it deadly. Prepare for winter driving before winter storms head your way.

What’s the Danger?

Driving on wet, icy, or snowy roads increases your odds of losing control of your vehicle. These conditions also increase how long it will take to stop your vehicle. Depending on conditions and the type of vehicle (i.e. car or semi-truck) it can take 10 times the normal stopping distance or more when road conditions are dicey.

Other dangers include:

- **Black ice** happens when transparent ice covers the road. Your vehicle can slip out of control suddenly because the ice is hard to see.
- **Blowing snow** causes limited visibility. Then it can be very difficult to see the road at all.
- **Devil’s strip** is the narrow strip of ice and snow which divides lanes of traffic. It can affect your vehicle’s grip in unexpected ways.
- **Slush grab** happens when your vehicle’s tires track the slush on the shoulder of the road or in ruts of the road. It can be a serious issue when you’re driving and it’s very different from driving in snow and ice. Slush is “grabby”, and it can suddenly and significantly slow your car way down. Use caution when changing lanes and wherever slush is present.

How to Protect Yourself

You can’t control the weather, but there are actions you can take to be prepared. First, make sure your vehicle is maintained and equipped for cold weather. Items to check include:

- Antifreeze and windshield wiper fluid levels.
- Tire pressure and chains; and the
- Heating and defrosting systems.

Next, have a winter survival kit on hand. You'll be glad you have it should you have to spend a night on the side of the road. Suggested supplies include:

- A shovel, sand, and road flares.
- Extra warm clothing and footwear and a blanket.
- Pack non-perishable food and water;
- Matches and a survival candle in a can.

You should also keep an ice scraper, a snow brush, a flashlight, and first aid kit in the vehicle. Additionally, a paper map is also a good idea, as phones can fail.

Once you get moving, keep the following in mind:

- Before leaving the parking lot, tap your brakes at a slow speed to see how your vehicle reacts.
- Then as you first start out, drive slowly and get the feel of the road.
- Remember, stopping distances on ice or snow can increase from four to 10 times normal stopping distances! That's why it's important to increase your following distance to four to six seconds behind any vehicles you are following. That could go up to 8-10 seconds or more – depending on conditions.
- Take it slow and easy reduce your speed well before a curve so you can maintain control of your vehicle.

Final Word

Driving on slick and snowy roads offers plenty of challenges. Be prepared to meet them safely.