

Road safety factsheet: Winter driving tips

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Winter driving tips

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Driving in the winter is very different than at other times of the year. Adverse weather and longer periods of darkness (especially after the clocks go back at the end of October) makes driving more hazardous. Sometimes conditions can be extreme, with prolonged periods of snow and floods.

In very bad conditions, avoid driving completely, unless you absolutely have to make the journey and driving is the only option.

Different weather conditions create different hazards throughout the winter and in different areas of the country at different times. A single journey may take us into very different weather, road and traffic conditions, so we need to be prepared for each one. This means that we need to adapt the way we drive to the conditions.

Prepare your vehicle

It's a good idea to have your vehicle fully serviced before winter starts and have the anti-freeze tested. If you can't have it serviced, then do your own checks. In particular, check:

- Lights are clean and working
- Battery is fully charged
- Windscreen, wiper blades and other windows are clean and the washer bottle filled with screen wash
- Tyre condition, tread depth and pressure (of all the tyres, including the spare)
- Brakes are working well and;
- Fluids are kept topped up, especially windscreen wash (to the correct concentration to prevent it freezing), anti-freeze and oil.

It's also a good idea to stock up on de-icer, windscreen wash, oil and anti-freeze at the start of winter.

Emergency kit

When extreme weather is possible, keep an emergency kit in your car, especially if you're going on a long journey. If this seems unnecessary, take a moment to imagine yourself stranded in your car overnight, due to a snowstorm or floods. How would you stay warm? What would you eat and drink? If you must drive in these conditions, we recommend that you carry:

- Tow rope
- A shovel
- Wellington boots
- A hazard warning triangle

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- De-icing equipment
- First aid kit (in good order)
- A working torch
- A car blanket
- Warm clothes
- Emergency rations (including hot drink in a flask)
- Mobile phone (fully charged).

Prepare your journey

Listen to local or national weather broadcasts and travel bulletins – especially for the areas you will be driving through. As conditions can change rapidly, check them regularly and be prepared to change your plans if conditions on your route worsen.

If conditions are very bad, and the emergency services are recommending that people don't travel, then avoid making your journey unless it is absolutely necessary. Can you postpone your trip? Can you travel by other means, or avoid the need for the journey completely by using the phone, video call or email?

Of course, what's 'essential' to one person may not be to another; we each have to make our own decisions according to our circumstances. But try to be realistic about which journeys are essential and which ones could be postponed. If you decide you really must travel:

- Let someone know where you are going and what time you hope to arrive, so that they can raise the alarm if you get into difficulties
- Plan alternative routes in case your main choice(s) becomes impassable
- Keep your fuel tank near to full to ensure that you do not run out
- Make sure you have a fully charged mobile phone, so you can call for help or alert someone if you're delayed
- If you don't have an emergency kit in your vehicle, at least take extra warm clothes, boots and a torch. Consider keeping a couple of long-life energy bars in the glove box
- Clear your windows and mirrors completely of snow and ice before you set off (make sure the heater is blowing warm air before setting off – it will keep your windscreen clear.)

Prepare yourself

Most of us have very little experience of driving in extreme conditions, such as snow, so take some time to consider how it affects your driving. Don't just drive as normal.

When was the last time you had any driver assessment or training? This is an ideal time for some refresher training. If your employer provides driver training, take advantage of it. Or you can contact the RoSPA Advanced Drivers and Riders group in your area. To find out which is the nearest to you, go to <https://www.rospa.com/road-safety/rospa-advanced-drivers-and-riders>.



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A lot of us will catch colds or other illnesses during the winter. If you're feeling so ill that your driving might be affected, don't take the chance of driving.

Driving in snow or ice

If you find yourself driving in snow or on icy or snow-covered roads, adapt your driving to these conditions:

- Reduce your speed. The chances of skidding are much greater and your stopping distance will increase massively
- Only travel at a speed at which you can stop within the distance you can see to be clear. Speed limits are the maximum in ideal conditions; in difficult conditions, they can often be too fast
- Avoid harsh braking and acceleration, or sharp steering
- Always reduce your speed smoothly and in plenty of time on slippery surfaces
- Slow down in plenty of time before bends and corners
- Braking on an icy or snow-covered bend is extremely dangerous. The centrifugal force will continue to pull you outwards and the wheels will not grip very well. This could cause your vehicle to spin
- To slow down on ice and snow, lift the gas early to allow the speed to drop sufficiently to select a lower gear. If you need to use the brakes, use very gentle pressure depressing the clutch early to avoid stalling the engine
- Increase the gap between you and the vehicle in front. You may need up to ten times the normal distance for braking
- Keep your vehicle well-ventilated. The car heater turned up full can quickly make you drowsy
- In snow, stop frequently to clean the windows, wheel arches, lights and number plates
- Visibility will probably be reduced, so use dipped headlights
- During wintry weather, road surfaces are often wet and/or covered in frost and ice or snow. But this does not occur uniformly. A road will often have isolated patches of frost or ice after most of the road has thawed – this commonly occurs under bridges.

If you get stuck in snow:

- If you get stuck in snow, revving your engine to try to power out of the rut will just make the rut worse. Instead, move your vehicle slowly backwards and forwards out of the rut using the highest gear you can
- If this doesn't work, you may have to ask a friendly passerby for a push or get your shovel out.

If you get caught in a snow drift:

- Don't leave your vehicle
- Call your breakdown service or the emergency services and let help come to you
- Don't run the engine to keep warm.



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Rain

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Rain reduces your ability to see and greatly increases the distance required to slow down and stop. Remember that you will need about twice your normal braking distance. Use windscreen wipers, washers and dipped headlights; drive smoothly and plan your manoeuvres in plenty of time.

Aquaplaning

Aquaplaning is caused by driving too fast into surface water. When the tyre tread cannot channel away enough water, the tyre(s) lose contact with the road and your car will float on a wedge of water. Aquaplaning can be avoided by reducing speed in wet conditions. Having the correct tyre pressure and tyre tread depth will maximise your tyres' ability to maintain their road grip. If it happens, ease off the accelerator and brakes until your speed drops sufficiently for the car tyres to make contact with the road again.

Flooded roads

- Avoid the deepest water – which is usually near the kerb
- Don't attempt to cross if the water seems too deep
- If you are not sure of the water's depth, look for an alternative route
- If you decide to risk it, drive slowly in first gear but keep the engine speed high by slipping the clutch – this will stop you from stalling
- Be aware of the bow wave from approaching vehicles – operate an informal 'give way' with approaching vehicles.

Remember to test your brakes when you are through the flood.

Fog

Avoid driving in fog unless your journey is absolutely necessary. Fog is one of the most dangerous weather conditions. A collision involving one vehicle can quickly involve many others, especially if they are driving too close to one another. If you must drive:

- Follow weather forecasts and general advice to drivers in the local and national media
- Allow plenty of extra time for your journey
- Check your vehicle before you set off. Make sure everything is in good working order, especially the lights
- Reduce your speed and keep it down
- Switch on headlights and fog lamps if visibility is reduced
- If you can see the vehicles to your rear, the drivers behind can see you – switch off your rear fog lamps to avoid dazzling them
- Use the demister and windscreen wipers
- Do not 'hang on' to the rear lights of the car in front as you will be too close to be able to brake safely
- Switch off distracting noises and open the window slightly so that you can listen for other traffic, especially at crossroads and junctions



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- Beware of speeding up immediately when visibility improves slightly. In patchy fog you could find yourself 'driving blind' again only moments later

- If you break down, inform the police and get the vehicle off the road as soon as possible.
- Never Park on the road in fog and never leave it without warning lights of some kind if it is on the wrong side of the road.

Strong winds

- Drive at a speed appropriate for the conditions
- Be cautious when overtaking high-sided vehicles and caravans
- Make sure you hold the steering wheel firmly
- Give cyclists and motorcyclists extra space – they can be blown off course by strong gusts of wind

Low sunshine

Ironically, having talked about all these poor winter weather conditions, winter suns can also cause difficulties. In winter, the angle of the sun in the sky will frequently be too low for your visor to help. If blinded by glare:

- Reduce your speed
- Reduce the effect of glare by keeping both the inside and outside of your windscreen clean and grease free
- If you wear sunglasses (with prescription lenses if necessary) take them off whenever the sun goes in. They should not be worn in duller weather or at night as they seriously reduce the ability to see.

If the worst does happen...

If you get stranded, don't panic.

Stay with your vehicle and call the emergency services on your mobile phone.

