

Winter Driving Advice

Winter motoring requires special care and attention if you're to avoid a breakdown or accident. A little preparation in time for winter can help make your car, and yourself, safer on the roads.

Vision

Through the winter months dazzle from the low sun can be a particular problem. You can improve your vision significantly by following the advice below:

- Improve vision significantly by making sure that the windscreen is clean – inside and out. Scratches, abrasion and chips on the outside can also worsen the dazzling effect of the sun.
- Use air conditioning for faster demisting and to reduce condensation on cold windows.
- Keep the windscreen and other windows clear – if your vision is obscured through dirt, snow or even sticker-infested car windows you could face a hefty fine.
- Check windscreen wipers and replace if necessary.
- Make sure that wipers are switched off in the park position when leaving the car, when there's risk of freezing. If you don't and the blades freeze to the screen, you could damage the blades or wiper motor when you turn the ignition on.
- Windscreen washer fluid should be topped up and treated with a proprietary additive to reduce the chance of freezing in frosty weather. Don't use ordinary engine antifreeze as it will damage paintwork.
- Clear snow from the roof as well as from windows. Snow piled up on the roof can fall onto the windscreen obscuring your view and can also be a hazard to other road users.

Visibility

- Check that all bulbs are working and that headlights are clean and aimed correctly.
- You must use headlights when visibility is seriously reduced. You may also use front or rear fog lights but these must be switched off when visibility improves as they can dazzle other road users and obscure your brake lights.
- Keep the number plates clean too, as you can be fined if they are dirty and illegible.

Tyres

- Check all tyres for condition, pressure and tread depth.
- Don't reduce tyre pressures to get more grip – it doesn't work, and reduces stability.
- Check you have a working jack and wheel brace, and that you know how to change a wheel if necessary.
- It's rare to need snow chains unless you live in an isolated area hit with heavy snow, and where the roads are not cleared. They must be removed to drive on a metalled road without a reasonable covering of snow.
- Buy snow chains from a specialist supplier to ensure that they're right for your vehicle, and practice fitting them in good dry conditions.
- Consider changing to winter tyres – these have a higher silicone content in the tread which prevents it hardening at lower temperatures, and therefore gives better grip in cold wet conditions.

Preparing to travel

- Get up at least 10 minutes early to give you time to prepare the car.
- Clear all windows of snow and ice using a scraper and de-icer.
- Use a cigarette lighter to warm a key for a frozen lock. Don't breathe on the lock, as the moisture will condense and freeze.
- Besides an ice scraper and de-icer, it's worth carrying a mobile phone with fully charged battery, torch, first-aid kit, tow rope, blankets, warm coat and boots, jump leads, snow shovel, warning triangle, an old sack or rug (to put under the wheels if you do get stuck) and water repellent spray.
- Plan routes to favour major roads which are more likely to have been gritted.

- Put safety before punctuality when the bad weather closes in. While it's always a good idea to allow extra time in winter for your journey, drivers must accept the inevitability of being late for work if they are caught up in an unexpected delay.

Floods and standing water

- Only drive through water if you know how deep it is.
- Drive slowly and steadily to avoid creating a bow wave. Allow oncoming traffic to pass first and test your brakes as soon as you can after leaving the water.
- Don't try driving through fast-moving water, such as at a flooded bridge approach – your car could easily be swept away.
- Driving fast through standing water is dangerous – tyres lose contact with the road and you lose steering control in what's known as 'aquaplaning'. Watch out for standing water, trying to avoid it if you can, and adjust your speed to the conditions. If you do experience aquaplaning, hold the steering wheel lightly and lift off the throttle until the tyres regain grip.
- Driving fast through standing water is inconsiderate – driving through water at speeds above a slow crawl can result in water being thrown onto pavements, soaking pedestrians or cyclists. You could face a hefty fine and between three and nine penalty points if the police believe you were driving without reasonable consideration to other road users.
- Driving fast through standing water can cause expensive damage – the air intake on many cars is low down at the front of the engine bay and it only takes a small quantity of water sucked into the engine to cause serious damage. All engines are affected but turbo-charged and diesel engines are most vulnerable.
- As you drive slowly through standing water keep the engine revving by slipping the clutch, otherwise water in the exhaust could stall the engine.
- If you break down in heavy rain don't prop the bonnet open while you wait for the patrol to arrive – the engine will be more difficult to start again if the electrics are all rain-soaked.

Driving in snow and ice

It is important to remember that stopping distances are 10 times longer in ice and snow and the key to safe driving is gentle manoeuvres. Driving in snow and ice can be difficult, but by following the advice below, it can be a lot safer.

- Wear comfortable, dry shoes: cumbersome, snow-covered boots will slip on the pedals.
- Select second gear when pulling away, easing your foot off the clutch gently to avoid wheel-spin.
- Try to maintain a constant speed, choosing the most suitable gear in advance to avoid having to change down while climbing a hill.
- When driving downhill, choose third or fourth gear to prevent skidding.
- Always apply brakes gently. Release them and de-clutch if the car skids.
- If you have an automatic, then under normal driving conditions (motorways, etc) it's best to select 'Drive' and let the gearbox do the work throughout the full gear range. Many modern autos have a 'Winter' mode which locks out first gear to reduce the risk of wheel spin. Check the handbook if you're not sure.
- If you do get stuck, straighten the steering and clear the snow from the wheels. Put a sack or old rug in front of the driving wheels to give the tyres some grip. Once on the move again, try not to stop until you reach firmer ground.

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