

Be prepared before winter arrives

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QUEBEC CITY: We may not want to think about it, but Old Man Winter will soon be nipping at our heels. And with the winter weather soon upon us, it's time to prepare our vehicles for the nasty weather ahead.

Most new vehicles these days come from the factory with all-season radial tires as standard fare.

A common misconception is that all-season tires are good for all weather conditions and all temperature ranges and that's just not the case.

To help demonstrate the importance of having the proper tires and using the right driving techniques in wintry conditions, GITI Tire invited a group of journalists and tire dealers to Quebec City late last winter to test GT Radial winter tires and learn more about winter driving techniques from professional instructors.

A portion of the winter driving exercise gave us an opportunity to drive on ice in a hockey arena. You may think we spent our time slip, sliding away on the icy surface, but with proper technique, and proper tires, it is possible to maneuver safely even on a slick sheet of ice.

Calling tires 'all-season radials' is a misnomer, because they really aren't suitable for all seasons, unless you're down south and your winter is snow and ice-free.

Their tread pattern is not meant for ice and snow and the rubber compound is too hard to get the grip you need for winter driving.

Another group of tires are called 'all-weather' and these may be suitable for areas where severe winter conditions are the exception rather than the norm.

With a tread compound similar to that of winter tires, the all-weather tires have a softer compound in the inner half of the tread, but not the entire tread. In reality, these tires are somewhat of a compromise between all-season tires and winter tires.

An advantage is you don't have to keep changing from one set of tires to another; a disadvantage is they don't perform as well as proper winter tires.

Many drivers mistakenly believe that the tire's tread is the single most important component in the tire's performance on ice and snow.

While tread pattern and depth are important, the tread compound is actually the most important contributor, according to William Estupian, director of technical service for the GT Radial brand, which have been sold at tire dealers across Canada since 2004.

For example, the tread compound for the GT Radial Champiro WinterPro tire has special rubber polymers that help maintain grip in frigid temperatures. In fact, the tire is designed for optimal performance between -10 degrees C and +5 degrees C.

'The tread compound is one of the biggest differences between all-season tires and purpose-built winter tires,' said Estupian. 'Summer tires start to lose grip performance at 5 degrees C.'

The WinterPro tires also have unique elliptic grooves in the tread design that work like a pump to move water away from the tire's contact patch, the part of the tire that touches the road surface.

On ice at the hockey arena, slow and easy was the order of the day, just as it should be for drivers facing icy road conditions.

Through a series of braking and cornering exercises, it didn't take long to realize that if you accelerate slowly and smoothly, you can maneuver on a slick icy



Winter tires have softer rubber compounds and special tread technology to help maintain grip in frigid temperatures.

surface, provided you have the proper tires that will adhere to the ice.

During trips around a couple of outdoor test courses at a nearby harness racing track, we got to sample both the WinterPro tires and cars outfitted with studded tires. While the latter are banned in southern Ontario, they are available in other parts of the country. The studs provide very aggressive grip when you are dealing with severe ice and snow conditions.

Even with the best of winter tires, smooth and slow are the keys to keeping on the straight and narrow when it comes to snowy and icy conditions.

The best word of advice winter driving experts can impart is to have the proper tires AND drive according to the conditions.

Other keys to driving on ice and snow, experts say, are braking early and smoothly, keeping your eyes on the road far ahead of you to anticipate possible emergency stops and taking corners slowly and smoothly.

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