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Plan now for safe winter driving

Thanks to global climate change, many of the weather patterns we've grown accustomed to in the past are no longer the norm. It seems much of the country experiences shorter than normal days of moderate spring and fall weather, with seasons simply switching from scorching sun one moment to chilly temperatures and snow the next. That means it's never too early to take a refresher course in preparing for safe winter driving.

Winter weather takes all of the usual road hazards and steps them up a notch. Slippery roadways, congestion, road rage, and pedestrian traffic – all of these situations seem magnified when the weather is poor and daylight is waning. Although winter driving may be frustrating, there are ways to prepare for the season and prevent accidents and injuries.

Prepare

It's important to check that a vehicle is in top shape before the cold weather sets in. Pay special attention to the tires. If they are bald or have significant wear, that could prove hazardous on weather-slicked roads. Have tires replaced before the first snowfall. The same can be said when switching from regular performance tires to all-weather or snow tires. Be sure to change all of the tires on the car, even if it is just a front-wheel drive vehicle.

Now is the time to also get a tune-up on the vehicle. Cold weather can make it hard for a car to perform at its best, and any problems should be eliminated before they spiral out of control. Be sure to top off any fluids in the car, especially windshield washer fluid you might need to improve visibility during a storm. Check

the function of wiper blades and change them if they aren't up to snuff. Consult with a mechanic to find out if it is advisable to switch motor oil viscosity during the winter to improve flow through the engine and help with cold start turnover.

It also helps to stock up on supplies should you get stranded or stuck including: a snow shovel, scraper/brush, tire chains, flashlight (with extra batteries), abrasive material, like cat litter, sand, or salt, jumper cables, flares or reflective triangles, brightly coloured cloth to signal for help, empty water-tight container with candles, matches or lighter, bottled water, and a snack, sleeping bags or blankets, ski caps, and mittens, first-aid supplies.

Skidding

How best to manoeuvre a car when it starts to skid depends on how the vehicle handles. If the rear wheels skid, turn the steering wheel, and subsequently the front wheels, in the same direction of the skid. If the front wheels skid, take your foot off the gas and shift to neutral. Don't try to steer immediately; the skid may slow, and traction could return. Then you can steer in the direction you want to go and put the car back into drive.

Keep in mind that even with expert manoeuvring it can be tricky to recover from a skid on ice. Snow tires are not infallible and may be ineffective on icy roadways.

Leaving Space

One of the best things a person can do when driving in winter weather is to slow down and add much more room for reacting to roadway conditions. Driving slowly and braking slowly may

help to prevent skids. Also, should a skid occur, having more room between you and another vehicle helps you to manoeuvre elsewhere or come to a stop without causing an accident.

When visibility is poor, leaving extra room means you can react if something suddenly veers into the path of the car or you missed seeing it through the snow and sleet.

Stranded or Stuck

Should the car break down or it becomes stuck in the snow, there are some things you can do. Be sure to steer or push the car to a safe location, if possible. Put up warning flares or triangles so that you are visible and leave the four-way flashers on if the battery is operable.

You can try "rocking" the car, by putting it in drive and hitting the gas, then in reverse and pressing on the accelerator to create a valley in the snow that might free the car. Use your abrasive material to provide traction. You can also attempt to shovel out the tires.

If the car is inoperable, stay in the vehicle out of harm's way and call for help on a mobile phone. Leave a window cracked open if you will be running the engine for periodic heat. The National Safety Council says that you can run the engine for heat about once every hour, or every half hour in severe cold. Be sure to clean snow from around the end of the tail pipe to prevent carbon monoxide build-up. For extra heat, don blankets or a sleeping bag to prevent hypothermia.

Driving in winter conditions can be exhausting and hazardous. Being prepared for common scenarios decreases the risk of an accident.

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