

Winter driving tips



Of all the seasons, winter requires the most care and preparation if you're to stay safe. Breakdowns and collisions are more common at this time of year – twice as likely in fact. Remember, road conditions can be treacherous and change quickly.

So here are some of our tips for a safe and trouble free drive through the cold, dark months ahead.

Winter driving kit – don't leave home without it!

- Working torch
- Blanket
- Warm coat, hat & gloves
- Sturdy boots or wellingtons
- Hot drink in a flask, high energy bars, dried food such as unsalted nuts
- Mobile phone, fully charged plus portable charger
- Road atlas – don't rely on your sat nav system
- First aid kit
- High-vis vest
- Jump leads
- Hazard warning triangle
- De-icing equipment
- Tow rope
- Shovel
- Old carpet/cat litter to put under tyres

Before you go

Get up at least 10 minutes earlier to give you time to prepare the car.

Don't drive off like a tank commander, with a tiny hole cleared in the windscreen. Clear all windows using a scraper and de-icer.

Frozen lock? Use a cigarette lighter to warm the key or a quick dab of hand sanitizer also works. Don't breathe on the lock! The moisture will condense and freeze. You can prevent freezing by a quick squirt of WD40 into your locks, as well as wiping a cloth with WD40 around the rubber door seals.

Major roads are more likely to have been cleared and gritted. Plan your route to favour those where possible.

Put safety before punctuality when the bad weather closes in. Allow extra time for winter journeys but be prepared for the inevitability of being late for work due to unexpected delays.

Battery and electrics

Lights, heaters and wipers put high demands on the car battery. If your driving is mainly dark rush-hour trips, the battery will take heavy wear and if more than 2 years old may let you down.

- Should your car stand idle on weekends, then a regular overnight trickle charge is a good idea to give the battery a chance to revive
- Turn off non-essential electrical loads like lights, rear screen heater and wipers before trying to start the engine
- Use the starter in short 5 second bursts if the engine doesn't start quickly, leaving 30 between attempts to allow the battery to recover.
- Avoid running electrical systems any longer than necessary – turn the heater fan down

Winter breakdowns

Tyres – we recommend winter tyres when it is below 7 degrees

Roadside recovery companies recommend at least 3mm of tread for winter motoring, and certainly no less than 2mm.

Don't reduce tyre pressures to get more grip – it doesn't work, and reduces stability.

Winter or all season tyres – these have a higher silica content in the tread which prevents it hardening at lower temperatures, and therefore gives better grip in cold and wet conditions. These are not just snow tyres, but give better grip in the wet and temperatures below 7 degrees.

The importance of antifreeze

A continuous squealing noise as soon as the engine is started? Stop the engine immediately – it's a sign the water pump is frozen – the sound is the fan belt slipping on the pulley. The cylinder block could be frozen too. Your engine will need to thaw out. This may take several days unless the car can be moved to a heated garage.

If the car begins to overheat a few miles from home it's likely that the radiator has frozen preventing coolant from circulating. Stop straight away to avoid serious damage and allow the radiator to thaw.

- **A frozen and cracked engine block will cost hundreds of pounds to repair. Feed it antifreeze to keep the frost at bay**
- **Most modern cars use long-life antifreeze. Check the handbook or ask a dealer for advice**
- **You need a 50-50 mix of antifreeze and water in the cooling system for winter. This gives maximum protection down to -34° centigrade, and without it, severe engine damage costing hundreds of pounds can occur**

Visibility

Make sure that all bulbs are working and that lenses are clean. When roads are really mucky you might need to clean lights after every journey. Keep the number plates clean too, as you can be fined if they are dirty and illegible.

If you have to clear snow from the car it's important to clear it from the lights – front and back – as well as from the glass and roof.

You must use headlights when visibility is seriously reduced. Front or rear fog lights are good but these must be switched off once visibility improves as they can dazzle other road users and obscure your brake lights. Many cars now have automatic lights – be aware that these may not work in dull light or fog, so if in doubt, switch on your dipped headlights manually.

Top tips for driving in snow and ice

Gentle manoeuvres are the key to safe driving – stopping distances are 10 times longer in ice and snow.

- **Pull away in second gear, easing your foot off the clutch gently to avoid wheel-spin. If you get into a skid, remember to take your foot off the pedals and steer**
- **Stay in a higher gear for better control. If it is slippery, in a manual car you can move off in a higher gear rather than just using first gear**
- **When driving in snow, get your speed right – not too fast so that you risk losing control, but not so slow that you risk losing momentum when you need it. Brake, steer and accelerate as smoothly as possible**
- **Slow down and accelerate on the straight, just steer around bends**
- **Only use the brake if you cannot steer out of trouble, if you must use them, apply gently**
- **Uphill – avoid having to stop part way up by waiting until it is clear of other cars or by leaving plenty of room to the car in front. Keep a constant speed, choosing the most suitable gear well in advance to avoid having to change down on the hill**
- **Downhill – reduce your speed before the hill, use a low gear and try to avoid using the brakes. Leave as much room as possible between you and the car in front**
- **If your vehicle has ABS / ESP, it will not give the same control in very slippery conditions – do not rely on it as it can't do anything that the tyres won't**
- **Automatic transmission – under normal driving conditions (motorways, etc) it's best to select 'Drive' and let the gearbox do the work throughout the full gear range. In slippery, snowy conditions it's best to select '2', which limits the gear changes and also makes you less reliant on the brakes. Some autos have a 'Winter' mode which locks out first gear to reduce the risk of wheel spin. Check the handbook**

If you 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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