



A Quick Refresher: Driving and Maintaining Your Vehicle in Wintry Conditions

Michael Kelly

To be a safe driver, you must be able to handle your [vehicle](#) in all conditions. This article explains some of the best winter driving tips to help you stay safe on snowy and icy roads.

Tips for Safe Winter Driving

Maintain Distance

In normal driving conditions, you should maintain at least three seconds of distance from the car in front of you. In winter driving conditions you should expand this to at least eight to 10 seconds of distance. This will help ensure that you can brake in time to avoid any collisions if other cars stop or slow down abruptly.

Drive for the Conditions

Speed limits are based on perfect road conditions. In winter driving conditions, going 65 mph on the highway can be fatal. Use your judgment and reduce speed to what you

think is safe. Also, don't feel pressured by a driver behind you who is tailgating or flashing their lights. You know what's safest for you. If necessary, pull to the side of the road to let the driver pass.

Respect Snowplows

Keep a distance of at least 70 feet (four car lengths) behind a snowplow. This will help ensure that you are not in one of the plow's blind spots. It can also help keep the sand spraying from the back of the plow from damaging your vehicle. Also, never pass a plow. It is frustrating when they drive under 35 mph, but parts of the road they have not yet cleared may be unsafe.

Don't Use Cruise Control

Cruise control can help improve your fuel economy but it's dangerous to use in snowy conditions. Cruise control keeps your car traveling at a consistent speed. If your vehicle loses traction on a patch of ice, cruise control will accelerate to try to maintain speed.

Know When to Stay Off the Road

Aside from a travel ban, there is no specific rule to determine when you should and shouldn't drive in the snow. A recommendation, though, is to check the forecast for all the areas that you'll be driving through. Be sure to check the weather for the time you're expecting to be on the road. Winter snow conditions can change very quickly. You don't want to get caught in heavy snows during a long commute.

You should also make sure that your vehicle is ready for the winter weather. The following section will help you learn how to maintain your vehicle in the winter months.



Vehicle Maintenance Tips for Better Winter Driving

Check Your Tire PSI

Your tires will deflate one PSI for every 10° drop in temperature. Under inflated tires can decrease vehicle handling and brake response time. Check your tires' PSI using a digital tire pressure gauge and keep them inflated to the correct PSI during the cold winter months. You can find the correct PSI for your vehicle's tires in your owner's manual. There should also be a sticker that states your vehicle's correct tire PSI in the driver's side door jam or glove compartment.

Clean Your Car After Snowfall

In some states you may get a ticket for driving a vehicle without clearing the snow off first. Failing to do so is not only dangerous for you but for other drivers on the road. Uncleared snow can fly off your car while driving and hit another vehicle. Always clear all parts of the car before driving. This includes the roof and hood but also all the windows, lights and mirrors.

Keep Your Gas Tank at Least Half-Full

It's possible for condensation to form in the empty part of your gas tank. In cold winter months this condensation can freeze. The frozen condensation can then block your fuel line. This blockage can prevent your vehicle from starting or running properly. Be sure to keep your gas tank at least half-full during the winter.

Mix the Correct Antifreeze

The right mixture of antifreeze can keep your car running in the wintertime. It can also increase the lifespan of your engine block. A 50/50 water/antifreeze mix is often recommended, but check the labeling on the antifreeze bottle first. Using more antifreeze will not help protect your car in the colder months. Instead, it can destroy your engine block. Also, make sure that your windshield wiper fluid is treated to handle the winter months as well. You may need to add anti-freeze fluid based on the temperatures you are expecting.



Check Your Tire Treads

You'll need all the traction you can get to handle your car in winter driving conditions. Check your tires by placing a penny with Lincoln's head, upside down and facing you, in the tread. If you can see Lincoln's entire head then there isn't enough tread on your tires and you should replace them.

Stay Warm if Your Vehicle Breaks Down in the Winter

Immediately bundle up with as many layers as possible. You can run the heater but only if you know the tailpipe of your car is not obstructed by snow. If it's safe for you to get out of your vehicle, you can do so to check the tailpipe and clear snow out of the way if needed.



It's best to stay off the roads during a snowstorm. But if you must travel, be sure to follow the winter driving tips outlined in this article. Additionally, maintain your vehicle so that it can handle the winter months. If you don't feel comfortable making these adjustments, ask a mechanic. You should also make sure that your vehicle is has [the right type of car insurance](#) and [towing insurance](#). Following these tips will keep you and others safe while driving in the winter.