

Be prepared for Winter Driving

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Police said a winter whiteout, ice and speed were factors in a massive, chain-reaction pileup in Michigan on Jan. 9, 2015. The sights and sounds of the nearly 200 vehicles – reportedly 76 semi-trucks and 117 passenger vehicles – crashing on both sides of the highway were horrific, according to 911 calls. The crashes killed one person and injured many others.

Driving in the winter can be harrowing, especially where blizzard and icy conditions crop up seemingly out of nowhere. Midwesterners may be used to heavy snow, but residents of states as far south as Georgia and Texas are seeing ice and snow more often. Driving can be even more treacherous in these areas because drivers are not accustomed to it.

Drivers can take precautions to ensure they will arrive safely at their destination.

Check the Weather Before You Go

If the weather is frigid, you're going to want to warm up the car before you drive it. To prevent carbon monoxide poisoning, never leave a vehicle running in an enclosed area, such as a garage. In fact, the Consumer Product Safety Commission warns that a car running in an attached garage is never safe, even with the garage door open.

If the forecast looks iffy, wait out the storm if possible. But if you must travel make sure you share your travel plans and route with someone before you leave.

If you become stranded in an unfamiliar area, do not leave your car. Light flares in front and behind the car and make sure the exhaust pipe is not blocked by snow, mud or any object.

Prepare Your Car for Winter

Besides checking the weather, it's important to have a mechanic check the condition of the following vehicle systems before heading out on the road:

- Ignition
- Brakes
- Wiring
- Hoses and fan belts
- Spark plugs
- Air, fuel and emissions filters, and PCV valve
- Distributor
- Battery
- Tire wear and air pressure

- Antifreeze level and freeze line

Know What to Do to Avoid a Crash

You've done all you can to prepare your car, you've checked the weather, but suddenly you find yourself driving in a slippery mess. If visibility is severely limited due to a whiteout, pull off the road and don't even attempt to drive farther until conditions improve.

But sometimes water or ice on the road can surprise drivers, even with little to no precipitation. Do you know how to prevent a skid?

Would you know what to do if you ended up sliding toward another vehicle or fixed object? If you don't want to end up in a crash like the one in Michigan, AAA offers some winter driving tips.

- Never mix radial tires with other types of tires
- Avoid using your parking brake to slow or stop
- Do not use cruise control in wintery conditions
- Look and steer in the direction you want to go
- Accelerate and decelerate slowly
- Increase following distance to 8 to 10 seconds
- Know whether you have antilock brakes, which will "pump" the brakes for you in a skid
- If possible, don't stop when going uphill
- Keep your gas tank at least half-full
- If you do get stranded, don't try to push your vehicle out of snow
- Signal distress with a brightly colored cloth tied to the antenna or in a rolled up window

Don't Leave Home Without These

In an emergency situation, in addition to a full tank of gas and fresh antifreeze, National Safety Council recommends having these with you at all times:

- Properly inflated spare tire, wheel wrench and tripod jack
- Shovel
- Jumper cables
- Tow and tire chains
- Bag of salt or cat litter for better tire traction or to melt snow
- Tool kit
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Reflective triangles or flares
- Compass
- First aid kit
- Windshield cleaner
- Ice scraper and snow brush
- Matches in a waterproof container
- Scissors and string or cord
- Nonperishable, high-energy foods like unsalted, canned nuts, dried fruits and hard candy
- Blankets, mittens, socks and hats

Winter road trips — even short ones — are a great way to celebrate with family and friends. Being prepared can ensure a safe and happy time is had by all.