

Winter Driving Tips: How to Drive in the Snow



In a perfect world, all roads would be dry and untrafficked. But in the real world, drivers face a wide variety of weather conditions, and when snow is added to the mix, the potential for automotive disaster can increase exponentially. Whether you venture to the ski slopes once in a blue moon or spend six months of every year in snowy climes, we've assembled a few crucial points to remember while braving snow-covered roads. Follow these tips, and you might even look forward to cold weather driving!

Slow, Turn, Go!

Dynamically speaking, a car can only do three things: accelerate, turn and brake. While it's possible to combine those commands from the behind the wheel, vehicles are far easier to control when those actions are performed separately. Let's say you're approaching a sharp bend on a snowy road: first, gently apply the brakes in advance of the turn. After taking your foot off the brake, coast through the corner while turning the wheel. Only after you've exited the turn and straightened the steering wheel, gently accelerate. "As easy as that sounds intellectually, it's really hard for most people to put into practice," says Mark Cox, Director of the Bridgestone Winter Driving School.

Limit Your Speed, and Think Ahead

Excessive speed is the single biggest reason people lose control in the snow, and slowing down will give you enough wiggle room to correct your course in case your vehicle loses control. "It takes 4 to 10 times longer to stop in ice and snow," explains Cox. "Adjust your speed to the conditions," he adds, "but also remember that going too slow can be just as problematic as going too fast."

If You Start to Slide...

... don't panic! A proper response will ensure that car control is regained. If the vehicle oversteers (i.e., the back end swings out), accelerate lightly in order to transfer weight to the rear and increase traction. It may feel counterintuitive to press the gas pedal while a car is sliding, but that action can straighten out the tail-happy yawing motion. Conversely, if the car understeers (i.e., slides forward without turning), straightening the steering and gently touching the brakes will shift more weight over the front wheels and enable the tires to "bite" again. As with all winter driving maneuvers, using a gentle hand and not stabbing the gas, brake or steering wheel is the most effective way to recover from a slide.

Humans tend to target fixate. Couple that with the natural reflex to go where you're looking, and it's no wonder so many out-of-control cars head straight into curbs and lampposts. By training yourself to look where you want to go, your hands will follow your eyes and steer away from danger.

Smooth and Easy Wins the Race

Race drivers swear by smoothness when it comes to driving technique, and that practice becomes even more important in wintry conditions. “Pretend you’ve got a cup of coffee on the dashboard,” advises Matt Edmonds, Vice President of TireRack.com. “If you make sudden or abrupt movements, you’ll go from grip to no grip very quickly.” On the other hand, “[smooth inputs] will help you sense the limits of your tire’s grip before your car starts to slide.”

Know Your Limits and Your Car’s Limits

Becoming familiar with your car’s handling dynamics will prepare you for the unexpected. When the going gets slippery, does your car understeer (plow forward), oversteer (fishtail) or drift sideways? Weight distribution, suspension and drivetrain setups (like front-, rear- or all-wheel drive) affects how your car reacts to adverse conditions. If you can’t attend a driving school and learn about vehicle dynamics from the pros, carefully explore your car’s limits in a safe area like an abandoned parking lot. Once your sense memory develops, you’ll be better prepared to handle a slide when it arrives unannounced.

Don’t Rely Too Much on Technology

Electronic aids like anti-lock brakes and traction control have done wonders for vehicle safety, but icy conditions can render those features useless. Once a tire loses its mechanical grip on a slick surface, all the high-tech gizmos in the world won’t stop that vehicle from spinning out of control. Avoid the inescapable laws of physics by keeping your speed reasonable and maintaining a safe distance from cars and objects around you.

Pick Your Tires Like You’d Pick Your Shoes

“Some shoes are good at everything, but not great at one thing,” says Edmonds. Following that logic, you wouldn’t wear flip-flops in the rain—and likewise, you shouldn’t drive through winter snow on summer tires. Edmonds advises looking for the international symbol for winter tires, which is a snowflake on a mountain. A number of winter tire varieties exist; snowbelt states call for dedicated winter rubber which is referred to as a “studless ice and snow tire,” featuring more aggressive tread and deeper blocks. In regions where snow falls more occasionally, you might opt for so-called performance winter tires, which offer better grip under dry conditions.

A Question of Chains

Unless the law demands it, avoid installing chains and choose instead to invest in a solid set of winter tires. As it stands, winter tires are so effective that several provinces in Canada actually make it a legal requirement to install them during certain months of the year. California is the last U.S. state that requires chains on mountain passes, and those regulations may someday be eliminated.

Keep Your Car Maintained

A reliably running car can help avoid a world of complications in inclement weather. Make sure your tire pressure hasn’t dipped with the drop in ambient temperature, and your vehicle will be easier to control as a result. Install winter wiper blades in order to maximize visibility, and test your battery to make sure it can handle the challenges of cold weather cranking. Take care of your car, and it will take care of you.