



Road Safety in Dangerous Weather

Keeping Yourself and Others Safe While Driving

Hello and Happy 2024! To start off this year's Monthly Health Tips series, we'll be doing the first part of a two-part series on driving safety. This month, the focus will be on poor weather and how to adjust your driving to make sure you stay safe. As winter progresses, snow, heavy rain, hail, high winds, and glare coming off of freshly fallen snow/ice can become huge dangers to drivers. These tips will give a brief rundown on what you can do as a driver to help stay in control of your car in rough weather, and how to prepare for the next time you have to drive out in unfavorable conditions.

Bad Weather Basics

Most poor road conditions happen because of precipitation (rain, hail, snow, etc.), which ends up obscuring your vision and making otherwise safe roads slippery. While each sort of weather event has its own specific problems and their accompanying tips, there are a few that apply to all of them:

- If visibility is low for any reason, or if the road is slippery, remember to *slow down*. It's better to drive a touch slower than lose control of the vehicle or hit something.
- Make sure to keep an increased distance between yourself and other cars, at least a 5 – 6 seconds of following distance as opposed to the usual 2 – 4.
- Don't accelerate or decelerate quickly on slippery roads. It's harder for your tires to get traction on icy or wet roads (in the latter, it's called hydroplaning, or when the tires drift on the surface of the water).
- Don't use cruise control, as this feature is designed for dry weather conditions and will decrease your ability to respond.
- Make sure your tires are well maintained. Have them checked before driving if you know to expect bad weather.
- Always make sure you always have at least a half-full tank of gas.



Heavy Rain and Snow

Here in New England, icy winters and rainy autumn and spring are a common expectation. And while drivers here are more used to conditions like this than in other regions, there is still a limit to how easy a car is to handle on wet or icy roads. In addition to the above advice, be sure to do the following when dealing with heavy rain or snow:

- Make sure all headlights, rear lights, and brake lights are fully functional. You want to make yourself as visible as possible in low visibility conditions.
- If you have to use your wipers, make sure to turn on your headlights!
- Plan out your route and check weather conditions before you start driving. Make sure someone knows your route and expected arrival time in case something happens.
- Avoid trying to drive through deeper water, especially running water. Only a foot of running water is needed to sweep away most smaller cars, and two feet is enough to push trucks or SUVs.



- For snowy or wintery conditions, keep a cold-weather kit inside your car. This should include blankets, extra food and water, ice scrapers, a flashlight, warm clothing, medication, etc.
- If you are stranded in cold weather, especially heavy snowfall, do not leave your vehicle. Make yourself highly visible by tying off a bright-colored cloth on a car antennae (if available) or the top of the car.
- If stranded in cold weather, conserve fuel by only using the heat to clear away chill (use whatever you have as blankets to stay warm, even newspapers). Make sure to check your exhaust pipe and clear it of mud, snow, or ice so as to prevent carbon monoxide poisoning.
- If you begin to skid, **don't panic**. Maintain a visual of where you want to go and keep your wheel turned in that direction. Do not slam the breaks, as that will only make the car harder to control.
- On icy roads, try and avoid complete stops *where possible and appropriate*, since building up momentum can be tricky where traction is low. If you can roll slowly forward until the light changes, that's preferable. But always stay safe and do not endanger yourself! This doesn't mean you should ever run a red light!
- When dealing with hills and icy weather, don't try and accelerate (since there isn't enough traction for this to help). It's better to build momentum from a flat surface and use it to help get up the hill, if possible. Don't ever stop climbing uphill, as it will be very difficult to start the climb again without the build up of inertia. Decelerate as you begin to descend downhill slowly.

Low Visibility and the Sun

While visibility is lowest when there is a downpour or snowstorm, even sunny days can produce dangerous driving conditions by impeding a driver's ability to see. Driving into the sun, especially during winter, can produce glare that makes driving more dangerous. Following the above tips can help keep you safe in these conditions:

- Just as with inclement weather, keeping your headlights on can help alert other drivers to your presence.
- Just as with inclement weather, slow down and leave more room to start and stop between yourself and other drivers.
- Make sure your windshield is properly clean and free of pits or cracks, both inside and out.
- Do not store anything reflective on your dashboard (like brightly colored paper or other items that can reflect into the windshield).
- Use lane markings to help guide you on the road if you have difficulty looking forward.
- Make use of your sun visor to help reduce glare.
- Using polarized sunglasses can also help reduce glare. Some manufacturers can even create prescription sunglasses for those who need glasses, so that you don't have to wear sunglasses over your normal eyewear.



References

AAA Driver Guide for Driving in Rain - exchange.aaa.com/safety/driving-advice/wet-weather-driving-tips/

AAA Driver Guide for Driving in Winter Weather - exchange.aaa.com/safety/driving-advice/winter-driving-tips/

AAA Driver Guide for Driving into Sunlight - exchange.aaa.com/safety/driving-advice/dangers-of-driving-into-sun/

NHTSA Winter Weather Driving Guide - nhtsa.gov/road-safety/driving-in-severe-weather