Winter Driving Tips

The winter months present the most challenging overall driving conditions of the year. Limited daylight hours, changing road conditions, snow, ice and other precipitation can present daunting driving situations. However, with some planning, preparation and patience, driving can be less harrowing when conditions turn bleak. For veteran snow drivers, the following tips should be considered reminders, and for those less familiar with harsh conditions, these pointers should help make the experience a bit more manageable.

Allow Extra Time
This may not seem like a driving tip, but it’s where safe winter driving starts: Allow extra time to get to your destination. The same trip in winter weather — even if it’s only rain and poor visibility, but especially in snowy or whiteout conditions — will take longer than it does on a clear, dry roadway. Plan extra time for the trip, which reduces anxiety and should ease the temptation to rush or overdrive the situation.

Leave Extra Room
As driving conditions deteriorate and the road surface becomes slippery, you should increase the following distance between your car and the car ahead. Not only will it give you more room to stop, it will also help you see farther ahead to anticipate events. Don’t rely on the driver in front of you to determine if cars are stopped ahead or the road is blocked — you might notice first and avoid the problem. The recommended following distance for dry pavement is 3 to 4 seconds, which should increase to 8 to 10 seconds when driving in slippery or icy conditions.

Drive for Conditions
The general driving rule for adverse weather is slow down — everything takes longer in slippery conditions, whether it’s accelerating, braking or turning. Accelerate and decelerate slowly, allowing extra time if conditions get worse. If your car has adjustable drive modes use the snow mode, which in most cases will reduce throttle response and/or shift to a higher gear for more gradual acceleration.

Respect 4-Wheel Drive
Tires are very important, even for vehicles equipped with 4- or all-wheel drive — systems that help with acceleration but not necessarily with deceleration, cornering or stopping. With the wrong tires, 4-wheel drive may only get your car moving too fast for the conditions, so it’s important to have all-season or winter tires on your 4-wheel-drive vehicle. A 4-wheel-drive SUV equipped with 20-inch wheels and summer tires might be the first vehicle to end up in a snowbank as a compact car shod with all-season or winter tires drives merrily by. Drive for the conditions — even with 4-wheel drive.

Anticipate Changing Conditions
In wintry weather, the road surface and available traction are often changing — sometimes quickly and repeatedly. The next time you brake may take more distance than the last time, or when you accelerate the tires might slip when they didn’t a few minutes ago. Watch for signals that indicate changing conditions, such as rain turning to snow, snow turning to rain, a different shine to the road
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surface indicating ice, snow fully covering the road, brake lights ahead, or another car sliding ahead of or behind you.

Give Snowplows Room
In winter weather, snowplows and sand trucks are often out on roads to improve driving conditions. If you approach a snowplow or sand truck, stay back a safe distance and wait until the vehicle pulls over or turns. Passing maintenance vehicles in adverse conditions is ill advised, since you are increasing speed and overtaking into unknown road conditions. The plows are there for a reason. If you absolutely must pass, wait until you have extra room with no oncoming traffic and do so safely.