

It is that time of year as you head out for work or during the holidays, going to grandma's house or that family dinner many will be driving to that event over mountain passes or even staying local. During this time of year, the weather can change rapidly; the air temperature can hover around the freezing level, a weather system could bring wind, rain and snow. Being aware of the changing weather conditions is important. The leading cause of death during winter storms is transportation accidents. Many accidents could be avoided if drivers took time to learn and practice good safety tips for driving safely during inclement weather such as snowy and icy conditions.

Perhaps the deadliest danger of all is "black ice." Black ice is ice which forms on a roadway, usually due to snow melting and re-freezing. Since it is almost invisible, drivers fail to recognize black ice conditions and may drive at normal speeds-often resulting in very serious accidents. Always be alert to the possibility of black ice when temperatures are near or below freezing. Pavement that looks dry but appears darker in color and dull-looking should alert you to the presence of black ice.

Failing to allow enough time to stop is another major cause of winter driving accidents. During slippery conditions stopping distances can triple. Driving at a slower speed, anticipating stops at traffic lights and intersections, and applying brakes sooner than normal will help ensure accident-free stops. When braking, brake carefully with short, rapid application of the brakes. Avoid slamming on the brakes, this will only cause the wheels to lock up and you careen out of control. Always allow plenty of extra space between you and other vehicles to minimize the need for quick stops.

Acceleration, turning, and passing also present dangers during winter. Accelerate slowly to avoid loss of traction and subsequent loss of control. Turn slowly, with caution, to avoid sliding into a stationary object or the path of an oncoming vehicle. Avoid sudden movements. Pass with care because passing lanes are not maintained as well as driving lanes. Again, leave extra space between yourself and other vehicles so there's room to maneuver in case something goes wrong. During a skid, steer cautiously in the direction you want the car to go. Driving in the snow and ice is one of the most dangerous activities you can do while out on the road. Traction is at a premium and you can easily lose control of your vehicle.

Here are some tips you should remember for driving safely in winter:

- Always use your seatbelt.
- Turn on your headlights during adverse weather conditions. Overcast skies and falling snow limit visibility. It is important to see and be seen.
- Like all the signs say, bridges and overpasses freeze before the roadway, use extra caution in these locations.
- Driving in winter weather conditions causes physical and mental fatigue and reduces reaction times. Get plenty of rest and adequate nutrition. Don't drive while you're sleepy or on medication that causes drowsiness. Turn your cell phone off, have two hands on the steering wheel, and pay attention to driving.
- Prepare your vehicle well ahead of time. Check fluid levels, tire pressure, lights, and the battery. Have a mechanic give your vehicle a winter check-up and make any necessary repairs.
- Stock an emergency kit containing heavy clothes and a blanket, traction material such as sand or kitty litter, tire chains, a small shovel, first aid kit, flashlight, jumper cables, and a bright cloth to use as a flag.
- Be careful when exiting your car, either to walk to the job site, restaurant or maybe responding to an accident that just happen in front of you. The roadway may be slippery and you can lose your balance and fall or the other approaching vehicles may not be able to stop. Know your surrounding and don't assume that people can or will stop on slippery roadways.

Your family is waiting for you, it is important for you to get there safely and enjoy each other's company. Have a great season of feasting, watching Hallmark, football and being with family and friends! Let's be safe out there! Let's be safe out there!