

Loss Control *Insights*

Taking the Sting Out of Cold Weather Driving

Let's face it, winter driving is no joy ride. Whether you're driving to your local supermarket or trekking from Pittsburgh to Cleveland weather conditions can present treacherous obstacles for any driver, especially those heading out unprepared.

Don't overlook the importance of vehicle maintenance. Winter conditions can take a toll on vehicles and present some hefty mechanical problems. That's why one of the smartest things you can do as a driver is to give your vehicle a winter check-up and/or tune-up. Make sure you check the following: brakes, tires, radiator, windshield wipers, battery, electrical system, headlights/taillights, emergency flashers, directional signals, ignition, defroster, and exhaust system.

Be prepared for the worst. If your trunk is loaded with a blanket or sleeping bag, candles and nonperishable food items, you're on the road to surviving winter driving this season. It's also a good idea to include:

- ◆ first-aid kit
- ◆ jumper cables
- ◆ tire inflator
- ◆ shovel
- ◆ tool kit
- ◆ matches
- ◆ cellular phone
- ◆ flashlight with extra batteries
- ◆ tire chains
- ◆ rope
- ◆ ice scraper
- ◆ gloves, hats, boots
- ◆ road flares
- ◆ bag of sand or kitty litter

Once you have winterized your vehicle and packed your survival kit, here are some tips to help you arrive safely at your destination:

Know your brakes: Does your car have an anti-lock brake system (ABS)? It's important to know what type of brakes you have because vehicles equipped with ABS require different braking techniques in unplanned stops than those with conventional brakes.

Anti-lock brake systems are one of the most important and recognized safety features on any car, or truck especially in difficult or hazardous winter driving conditions.

There are two types of anti-lock brake systems -- four wheel and rear-wheel -- Passenger cars and some light trucks may have four-wheel ABS, whereas rear-wheel ABS is found exclusively on light trucks.

When properly used, four-wheel ABS improves vehicle steer ability, stability and stopping capability in emergency situations. Rear-wheel ABS is designed to maintain directional stability and prevent the vehicle from skidding sideways in emergencies

Winter drivers can benefit from ABS

While ABS cannot prevent all winter slides and skids, it can be effective in providing the ability for a controlled stop on wet paved surfaces and icy or packed snow-covered roads.

When braking on different surfaces, the speed at which each tire rotates can actually be different. This can cause swerving. With ABS, the system's computer monitors the speed of each of the vehicle's wheels, compares them and adjusts brake pressure to each wheel to ensure the car stops in the shortest distance possible under most road conditions.

Even though anti-lock brake systems can stop more quickly than conventional brakes on wet paved surfaces and on icy or packed snow-covered roads, stopping distances can be longer on loose gravel or freshly fallen snow.

Always "Brake And Steer" When Using Four-Wheel ABS

Unlike conventional brakes which require drivers to pump the brakes to prevent skidding or sliding, four-wheel ABS does the pumping for you automatically at a rate as fast as 18 times per second whenever a sensor detects the start of lock-up on one or more of your wheels.

To engage four-wheel ABS, keep your foot on the brake pedal until steering clear of hazards. Do not take your foot off the brake pedal or pump the brakes because either action will disengage the anti-lock system.

Rear-wheel ABS requires different braking behavior than four-wheel ABS

Rear-wheel anti-lock brake systems prevent the wheel lock of the vehicle's back wheels only. This allows you to maintain directional stability and prevents the rear end from skidding sideways in emergency situations.

The vehicle's front wheels can lock up on rear-wheel ABS systems, just like conventional brakes. If this occurs, you should ease up on the brake pedal with just enough pressure to allow the front wheels to roll again so you can steer.

Practice using your ABS in all weather conditions

It is important to practice using your ABS so that you are familiar with the feedback you will get from the system. You will know that your ABS is activated if you hear mechanical noises and feel some pedal pulsation. This indicates that your anti-lock brake system is

working. Do not take your foot off the brake pedal during this feedback; instead, continue to apply firm pressure to the brake.

As a driver, not only should you become familiar with your ABS in a non-emergency situation, such as an open parking lot or drivers' education range, but you should also practice ABS techniques on a variety of road conditions.

For instance, braking with ABS on a snow-covered road will feel different than braking on a normal road surface. Be sure to set aside time for all drivers of your ABS-equipped vehicle to practice using your ABS at the beginning of each season or when there is a significant change in driving conditions. To receive more information and a brochure on anti-lock brake systems, contact the toll-free ABS information line at 800-ABS-8958.

Whether driving with ABS or conventional brakes, here are some tips for safe driving:

- Always slow down and increase following distances when driving in bad weather conditions. Tailing other automobiles in any condition is unsafe, but in winter, snow and ice can make stopping distances much longer. In addition, be aware that entrance and exit ramps can be icy even when highway roads or other areas are clear.
- Always clean off entire car before driving it anywhere. Keep your windshield, windows, headlights and taillights clean. If snow or salt builds up while driving, stop at a safe place to use a snow brush or scraper. Use the car defroster and a clean cloth to keep the windows free of fog.
- Be more observant. Because visibility is often limited in winter weather conditions, slow down and watch for other vehicles. Also make sure all mirrors in your car are properly positioned

On upgrades, keep far enough behind the vehicle ahead so you won't have to slow down or stop. This will allow you to maneuver around obstacles and to gain a little extra speed at the bottom of the hill to give momentum that will help carry you over the top. At the hillcrest, reduce speed to a minimum, then descend in a low gear with as little braking as possible.

If your vehicle breaks down, don't panic. Pull as far off the road as possible and use common sense. Your greatest personal danger at this point is that of being hit by a passing car. Stay put until help comes, and run your engine and heater for short intervals only, making sure the windows are cracked open.

Either turn on your warning lights or open your hood to signal your emergency situation to other drivers. Hopefully your cell phone will work!

If possible, do not travel alone. Even if you are traveling just a short distance, it is best to travel with someone. Let a relative, friend or neighbor know where you are heading and let him or her know your planned arrival time.

Try to travel during daylight hours. Visibility when driving in winter weather conditions is often diminished due to sleet, snow, rain or fog. Therefore, it is even more important to take advantage of driving during daylight. Driving at night, coupled with winter weather, can result in dangerous situations.

Finally, if the winter road conditions prove to be tough, don't feel bad about "staying in" and rescheduling your trip when the weather permits safer driving conditions.