



Winter Driving

Will your car take you through the worst excesses of the weather over the darkest months of the year? Here are some ways to make sure you're not caught out in winter:

- ▶ Check the lights and get someone to stand behind and tell you when rear lamps come on. Prepare for the yes-no-yes-no joke when you test the indicators.
- ▶ Make sure the wipers aren't frozen to the windscreen and that the glass itself is as dry as possible inside and out.
- ▶ Check the fluid levels – particularly the antifreeze – and top up as required.
- ▶ Take a look at the state of the battery and if the connections are a bit corroded, give them a quick clean.
- ▶ Demist the inside thoroughly before setting off. In winter it's not uncommon for the screen to fog over as soon as you get in, so give it time to clear before you enter traffic.
- ▶ Your life depends on those few square inches of rubber between your car and the road. Make sure your tyres are at the correct pressure and have more than 1.6mm of tread – preferably over 2mm.
- ▶ When you start your car in the cold, it prepares to set off by injecting a big dollop of fuel into the engine. So if you're only moving it out of the way or a few feet into a garage, you may find it won't start the next time you want to use it. Prevent this by allowing the engine to warm up (at least get out of the blue bit on the gauge) before switching off the ignition.
- ▶ If you're worried about how to cope with skidding, many organisations offer training where you're let loose with an instructor in a specially modified vehicle. Learning how to react helps to build confidence and prepares you for dealing with the emergency.

Winter driving techniques

Motoring in snow, fog, or very heavy rain requires a specific technique. You are dicing with death if you simply charge ahead with no idea of what lies ahead, relying simply on your knowledge of the road layout.

What if there's a car struggling to overtake that lorry, but it's completely obscured by spray? There may be standing water a few feet away, black ice or a vehicle in trouble. Motorists must modify their behaviour and react appropriately.

- ▶ The first thing is to be aware of your surroundings – the road itself, other road users and their positions, and any changes in the weather.
- ▶ Leave at least twice as much space as normal between you and the vehicle in front, and then some.
- ▶ Make no harsh or sharp movements, braking and accelerating slowly and smoothly.
- ▶ In winter, drive as slowly as you're comfortable with – in as high a gear as possible on upward gradients and vice versa.
- ▶ Before ascending a snowy hill, let a little air out of your tyres and approach it from a good distance at a steady speed of barely faster than walking pace in second or even third gear. Keep it ticking over while continuing as consistently as possible. When it is safe to do so, stop and reinflate the tyres to the correct pressure.
- ▶ If your car crosses on ice or standing water, or you feel it sliding off the road, take your feet off the pedals. Braking will cause the wheels to lock and accelerating could see you shooting off in a random direction if the tyres suddenly find a patch of grip. Turn gently into the skid and let the car come slowly to a halt.

Driving in fog

Use the rear and front foglights with discretion!

They're very bright, and should really only be used in poor weather if there's no sign of anyone around. If a car's already following and you can clearly see its headlights, the driver knows you're there, so don't dazzle them with the rear. It's very annoying.

Front fogs should be used only when there is no road user ahead. And remember to switch them off – back or front – when the mist clears, or other road users are likely to be distracted.

Driving in snow

You may have to prepare for an unscheduled overnight stop if the weather suddenly closes in.

It does no harm to bung a torch, blanket (useful for you if it's cold, or for laying on the ground to provide traction if the car's stuck), a bottle of water and chocolate bar or two in the boot.

You'll know already if snow chains, a shovel or similarly heavy-duty gear is a good idea and, having listened to weather reports, you're in a good position to make an educated judgement. Packing a husky or two is probably going a bit far, though.

Make sure your mobile's fully charged, and tune into the radio to keep up to date about road conditions.

