

My friend Sylvia was driving home alone from a Christmas dinner with friends. It had been snowing all day. Suddenly, the car started to skid. Snow fell onto the windshield from the roof of the car, blinding her. She panicked and next thing she knew she was in the ditch at the side of the highway. Although she was unhurt, Sylvia spent a few hours in the dark and cold, in the middle of the city, until the police rescued her.

Safety first: Driving in winter

By Barbara Carter

Sylvia always considered herself a good driver, but after that experience she took some steps to reduce the risk of another accident and prepare for the hazards of winter driving. Busy caregivers, especially those who are seniors themselves, should consider the following suggestions to become safer winter drivers.

What you can do?

Slow down

It seems ridiculous to put this in writing, but many people still do not slow down when driving in the winter. Scientists will tell you that wet and slippery conditions mean the road surface changes and becomes dangerous. So—adjust your speed to suit. In addition, leave more room than ever between you and the car in front.

If you are really uncomfortable with the conditions, don't drive! Several years ago my husband and I decided not to drive to Montreal on Christmas Eve during a blizzard. Instead, we got up at six the next morning and had a stress-free drive under blue skies, passing lots of cars in ditches on the side of the road and arriving in time to eat a turkey dinner with our family.

De-snow, defrost and defog

You can't see what's going on around you if your car is covered in snow or your windows are fogged up. And other drivers won't be able to see you if your lights are covered. Snow from the top of your car can also fall on the car behind, blocking its driver's view (this has happened to



me) and creating problems for that driver.

What's the answer? Get rid of the snow. Spend an extra five minutes clearing any snow from the roof, windows, trunk, lights, side mirrors and hood of your car. And please don't drive until your windows are defogged.

Winterize your car

Make the following preparations:

- Top up your washer fluid before a long drive.
- Change your wiper blades to winter blades.
- Keep your gas tank at least half full. This reduces the condensation that can occur during the daily temperature changes we experience during our Canadian winters. Condensation is water, and water in your gas tank means trouble.

“Every mile
is two
in winter.”

George Hurbert

- Get those winter tires on at the first sign of snow!

Lights

Here are some lighting tips for driving in hazardous, dark or snowy conditions:

- Turn your high beams off when approaching other cars.
- Put your hazard lights on if you are driving below the speed limit or in extreme conditions.
- Turn your headlights on. Remember that daytime running lights only illuminate the front of your car—leaving the back dark.

Lessen blind spots

Adjust both side mirrors to reduce your blind spots.

- For the left mirror, put your head against the driver's side window and move the mirror until you can just see the road behind you and the side of your car.
- For the right mirror, lean over to the passenger seat, look to the mirror and again move it until you can just see the road behind you and the right side of your car.
- Even with these adjustments, when turning or changing lane you should always look quickly over your shoulder to check your blind spot. It's easy to miss another car or motorcycle that has snuck in beside you.

What the car can do

Tread heavily

Whether you have front-wheel drive, rear-wheel drive or all-wheel drive, experts suggest that you should put on winter tires. In fact, in Quebec it's the law. Winter tires give you better traction on ice and snow. The reality, though, is that defensive driving is still the best way to reduce winter accidents.

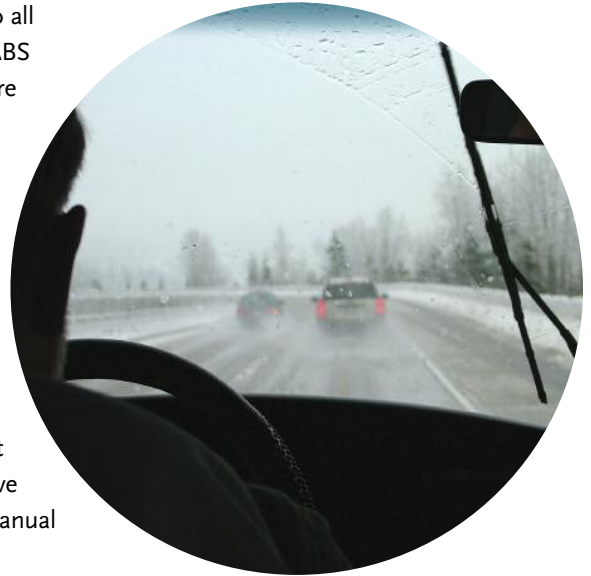
Many years ago I owned a sports car with high-performance tires. The first winter I slipped and slid everywhere. I finally had enough and spent some money on winter tires. They looked very strange on my beautiful car, but the change in its handling was unbelievable. And I was no longer afraid to drive.

ABS—anti-lock braking system

The technology for ABS has been in existence for many years now. But, unfortunately, many of us

think that the brakes will do all the work. Remember that ABS does not help you stop more quickly under most conditions. However, it can help you maintain steering control during braking so you can veer around obstacles.

ABS can make your brake pedal pulsate. This is perfectly normal, but can feel strange if you don't know to expect it. If you have ABS, check your owner's manual to get more information.



What the car could do

In the car business, new ideas and technologies lead to improved safety features every year. The more novel and elaborate systems are usually found on the pricier cars, but, over time, they often filter down to the mid- and lower-priced cars. Here are some features that you might look out for now or in the future.

Back-up sensors

This year my husband got a car with this feature and he loves it. When the car is in reverse, a beeping noise starts once he gets within a few feet of any object behind him. The beeps increase in frequency the closer he gets to the object—whether it is another car or the wall of the parking garage.

Front sensors

Some cars have adaptive cruise control. This helps you keep your distance from the car in front. When you set the cruise control for a certain speed, the car will sense if another vehicle pulls in front of you. Your car's braking system will then take over and slow you down. I know some tailgaters who would find this feature a little frustrating!

Parking

We've seen the TV ads and just can't believe it. A car that can park itself! What will they think of next? I've yet to experience this...I'm wondering, though, if you cannot back a car yourself, should you be driving at all?

“Winter is not a season, it’s an occupation.”

Sinclair Lewis

Other features to consider

You might want to choose navigation systems, emergency call systems, extra airbags, adjustable/custom seatbelts—the list goes on. Depending on the car you buy, some of these features are standard. You may also be able to buy them as after-market add-ons.

The bottom line

Your car manual will contain a lot of good information about driving, technology and dealing with hazardous conditions. Consider taking some time to review the safety features that are already on your car before the winter.

Technology can and does reduce accidents. Despite this, cars don’t drive themselves—people do. The bottom line is that we must slow down, improve visibility and have good traction in order to make winter driving safer. ●



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Emergency kit

Every fall I put together a kit that I stow in my car for the winter. I have a small shovel and some sand, plus some emergency items. These include:

- extra mittens
- a hat and scarf
- socks
- an old pair of winter boots
- a blanket
- matches
- a candle
- a packet of powdered soup
- chocolate
- a large cup and a spoon

In 35-plus years of driving, I’ve never had to use my emergency items. Even so, I’m glad they’re in the car. If you do get stranded it is usually best to stay with the car rather than risk walking through snow.



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