

Winter Driving

Take Precautions to Stay Safe While on the Road

By Lisa Marie Metzler

It was 2 o'clock in the morning. The rain was falling and the temperatures were dropping fast on the lonely Wisconsin Interstate. The road froze and turned to black ice. Shelly Wallman from Benzonia, Mich., was traveling with her mother and two children on that night. "When we crossed the bridge, the wind picked up and blew our minivan around," she says. "We spun around several times before ending up in the ditch."



Fortunately, no one was hurt. A man driving that night, who was helping other stranded travelers, found the Wallmans almost immediately. He wasn't able to pull them out of the ditch, but he did call the highway patrol from his ham radio. Eventually, the minivan was pulled out undamaged. Although the Wallmans were helped by their "angel," as Wallman says, some stranded motorists may have to wait several hours for help.

Taking Precautions

"The No. 1 recommendation we have is to have a cell phone with you when your travel," says Joe Brone, under sheriff of the Benzie County Sheriff Department in Michigan. "If that is not possible, then turn on your hazard lights and stay inside the car with your doors locked. If someone stops and offers to help, roll down your window a bit and ask the person to call for help." Brone also emphasizes that women should not be afraid to ask for an officer to come to the car and stay with them until the tow truck or other assistance arrives.

John Wehr, branch manager of the Traverse City, Mich., AAA Auto Club, recommends that you stay with your car and not accept rides from strangers. "Instead, carefully walk to a nearby public phone, or get the attention of a law enforcement officer," he says. AAA also suggests that you "[b]e aware of landmarks, buildings, highway numbers. This information is important when summoning assistance. If your car loses power in the middle of the road and you are unable to steer to the side of the road, then set the emergency brake and place warning triangles or flares well behind the traffic. If you or your vehicle could be struck by traffic, leave your vehicle for a place of safety."

Claim the Boy Scout Motto: Be Prepared!

Use the following tips to always be prepared in winter driving conditions.

- Before you leave on a long car trip or are traveling to a destination with which you are unfamiliar, tell a family member or friend of your plans. If you don't arrive in a timely matter, they will know your route and be able to get help.
- Always carry an emergency kit in your car. AAA recommends that a car emergency kit contain a flashlight, flares or reflective triangle, distress sign, a fully charged cell phone or change if you need to use a pay telephone, first aid supplies and some basic tools. Quality jumper cables, bottled water and non-perishable foods are also a good idea. And if you will be traveling during the snowy, winter months, make sure to pack blankets, extra gloves, socks, shovel and kitty litter. Kitty litter can be used to provide traction to get your car out of a slippery spot.
- Pack an "emergency fun kit" for the kids. Deborah Hinken from Montague, Mich., packs books, toys and travel games that her children do not play with regularly. This makes the items "new" and fun. She also packs non-perishable snacks, bottled water and baby wipes. These quiet activities can keep children busy and make it less stressful for you while you wait for the tow truck to arrive.



- Perform a routine check on the fluids in your car. Make sure your fluids – such as oil, windshield cleaner fluid, antifreeze, etc. – are full. Also use a tire gauge and check your tire pressure. Your car owner's manual should list the specific instructions and details on how to perform these tasks. Remember to fill up your gas tank before you leave. You may want to purchase a one-time use emergency gas carrier. It is compact and easy to store with your emergency kit.

Winter Car Care Tips

For those of us who have to drive in a climate that produces snow, sleet and ice, Tom and Ray Magliozzi, hosts of the weekly national radio program *Car Talk* and the nationally syndicated newspaper column "Click and Clack," strongly recommend that if your car needs a tune up get it done before the winter season starts.



"Any small problems you had in good weather will be bigger problems in bad weather," the Magliozzis say. "Have the belts, hoses, spark plugs, water pump, distributor cap, etc. checked before the season starts. Left unchecked, these can leave you stranded." Your car battery should be checked as well. "You will need more power from your battery to start your car in the winter," they say.

Again, whether winter or summer, make sure all your fluids are full. In the winter months you may use more windshield wiper fluid during a regular trip to town, simply because the roads are wet and slushy. Check the wiper blades to make sure they are in good working condition as well.

Special Tips for Winter Driving

According to Michigan's AAA, the leading cause of traffic crashes on ice-slicked, snow-clogged roads is following the car in front too closely. The driver in front stops; you can't. An easy tip to remember is to leave about two car lengths between you and the car in front of you. When you do need to stop, do not brake hard. AAA says, "In a skid, ease off the accelerator and don't lock up the brakes. Carefully steer in the direction you want the car to go and straighten the wheel as soon as the car begins to go in the desired direction."

Another factor to be aware of is that bridges and overpasses tend to ice up. Use extra caution while crossing them.

Staying Safe During an Emergency

So you've made all the preparations and know how to drive safely, but somehow you've ended up in a snowy ditch. What now? Use the guidelines for staying safe as stated above. To stay warm while you wait, get out the blankets you've stashed in your emergency kit. If your engine is still running and you need heat, you can run the car for heat. However, consider the carbon monoxide issues first.



"Leave a window open," Tom Magliozzi says. "If you have plenty of gas, run the engine until you're warm." He also cautions, "Don't run it so often that you run out of gas. Also, if it is snowing very hard, make sure that the tail pipe is not covered with snow or it won't start." Be sure to get an estimated time of arrival from the dispatcher or trusted friend who is coming to your aid, as this will help you determine how long to run the engine for heat.

By preparing yourself and your car, you should safely arrive at Grandma's house in time for milk and cookies!