

Preparing for Winter
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Another change of season is upon us, so it is time to adjust our mindsets to what challenges are ahead in the coming months. One way to do this is to anticipate the types of weather we'll get this winter, and what other hazards and bad conditions attend the changing of the season.

No matter how many persons your company employs, it is worthwhile to take a few minutes to examine with them the greatest hazards we face on a daily basis: driving. Even though it's November winter will be here before we know it. One good aspect this year is that gas prices have been falling, at least at the time of this writing.

But, as always, the seasonal problems are not just with weather conditions, although they complicate safe driving...the real problems are other drivers who don't have their priorities straight and drive carelessly. When the snow falls, there are a few drivers who don't adjust their driving appropriately and cause collisions whose effects involve others on the road. These are the hazards we face in winter driving.

Even a small snowfall will result in traffic delays...delays that can be anticipated, and since our society is obsessed with saving time, we want to get to where we are going in the fastest possible time. That's why we drive: to save time. The

National Safety Council says we drive to save lives, time and money. It's true. What is important to stress here is that we drive with the intention of saving lives. Heavy traffic (concentrated because the flow of traffic is slowed) can lead to collisions because drivers do not leave enough distance between their vehicle and the one in front of them. So, always maintain a safe following distance, even in congested traffic. Remember: You want to be able to *stop*, so PLAN AHEAD.

Another hazard will be black ice on the pavement. Black ice forms overnight, usually, but can follow a rain storm. It is nearly invisible, but if you are an experienced driver you should be able to adjust your driving to the conditions of the season. Drive with caution and stay alert.

Meanwhile, a storm can bring down tree limbs or branches. Debris strewn on the road can cause cars and trucks to make sudden maneuvers to avoid them.

Now the days are shorter and light conditions affect drivers who are leaving or driving in dark periods of the day. Not all vehicle drivers will turn on their headlights at dusk or early in the morning. Keep in mind that the purpose of headlights is two-fold: they allow the driver to see better, but also allow other drivers to see you. There are many variances of lighting conditions that are also affected by weather. It may be midday, but gathering storm clouds may require a driver to turn on his or her headlights, again to be seen rather than to see.

When the weather is bad, we want to get to where we have to go; we want to get off the road and to some place where we feel safe. That desire intensifies as we drive and as that frustration builds inside us, we tend to step on the gas pedal a bit more and move faster. You may not realize it, but you may have already passed an invisible marker where you pass from being in control to the point where you are not in control, but you do not realize it.

For your vehicle to be in control you must be able to stop or turn safely at the speed you are going. If you cannot...you are not in control. Do not fall into the trap that the media sets for you, i.e., making you believe that your vehicle is out of control when the car begins doing that 180-degree spin in the road. Your vehicle was **already** out of control (you were not able to stop or turn safely). The 180-degree turn often is the result of your stepping on the brake or the accelerator and losing *traction*. This is traveling too fast for conditions.

So, what can we do to lower the chances of becoming involved in a collision or going off the road? There are several recommendations, and each one is violated in winter at some point.

Next, **wear your seatbelt!** You may get hit by somebody else. If you do lose traction and slide into another vehicle, you may find your head moving in the direction of the steering wheel and windshield. A seatbelt will keep you in your seat. In a rollover, you will be bouncing around like a ping-pong ball.

Slow down. Keep your frustration level low if you possibly can. Keep in mind that you want to GET THERE, and as much as you want to get there *faster*, the faster your vehicle travels the greater likelihood that you will lose control and hit somebody or some *thing*, or go off the road completely. Think CONSEQUENCES.

If the frustration stems from your being late for work, remember that you want to GET THERE...period. If you are late because of snow or ice on the roads, you are going to be late. Accept it. In order to make up for lost time means you will have to drive *faster*!! Then you will create the situation that you wanted to avoid in the first place. Again, THINK AHEAD. If you know travel will be slow and you can expect delays, get up earlier and leave home early. Otherwise, plan on being late.

Many employers today recognize the congested highway situation and they allow for late arrivals on bad winter days when snow or ice make travel hazardous. If you drive a truck, remember that everyone else on the road has to deal with the same conditions and your employer would rather have you getting to your destination with you and your vehicle in one piece, and not have to call a wrecker to pull you out of a ditch. In that case, you don't make the delivery and somebody else has to come out and supply the customer. That's just the beginning of your troubles.

While you may find that the radio is soothing, keep in mind that it can also be a distraction. In very bad weather, especially where visibility is reduced because of heavy rain or snow, ice, or even fog, you need to concentrate on your driving. **Turn off the radio**, and while you are at it, **turn off the cell phone** so you are not tempted to answer a call or make a call. If you need the phone, then you can turn it on later.

CLEAR YOUR WINDSHIELD and windows of ice and snow. This means the *whole* windshield, not just a 6-inch diameter circle through which you can peer out. Good visibility is vital. Driving in bad weather is like a battle – you have to be prepared.

Anticipating other drivers' bad driving habits, judgment and mistakes will keep you a lot safer than if you just alter your regular driving habits. It is probably going to be another driver who gets you into a difficult situation. Bad weather driving requires a different mindset, not just an alteration in the normal routine. That means, keeping a safe following distance, slowing down, and staying alert.

Driving in bad weather can also be very tiring. Fatigue, especially for truck drivers, is an ever-present enemy. Two hours on the road battling ice or snow can be as tiring as driving for eight hours straight in good weather. Be mindful of fatigue, and if you find yourself giving in to “micro-sleep,” those times when you

feel yourself nodding off, pull off the road when it is safe to do so and at a place that you can exit from. Get out and clean off the vehicle's lights, and get some fresh air. This short break will help you in the long run.

Winter driving is not fun and it can be dangerous if you are not prepared for it. Follow these guidelines and remember to watch out for others' bad driving and you will survive the winter months and all that Mother Nature has in store for you.