



U.S. ARMY COMBAT READINESS/SAFETY CENTER

4905 5th Ave. Fort Rucker, AL 36362-5363
Comm. (334) 255-3770 Fax (334) 255-2266
<https://safety.army.mil>

Take the chill out of winter driving

Bob Van Elsberg
Strategic Communication Directorate
U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center
Fort Rucker, Ala.

The local weather forecast calls for snow, but you're about to hit the road for a long-awaited trip. You've planned ahead and know you're ready, but is your vehicle?

According to William Van Tassel, manager of Driver Training Operations for the American Automobile Association, preventive vehicle maintenance can save you a lot of anxiety on blustery winter days.

"With winter driving, preparation is the key to preventing trouble," he said. "A little effort at the start of the season can really pay off in terms of avoiding problems. Driving in winter conditions is already challenging enough. There's no reason it has to be any more difficult than necessary."

The following precautions, courtesy the National Safety Council, www.streetdirectory.com and www.tirerack.com, can help keep you going on your winter travels this year.

First, check your oil. Cooler temperatures can thicken your engine's oil into sludge, so consult your owner's manual to ensure yours is of the proper viscosity for the outside temperature.

Winter also takes a toll on vehicle batteries. Age is an important factor — replace batteries more than 4.5 years old. Also pay attention to your battery cables; remove the heads, negative side first, from the battery posts and clean both with a mixture of baking soda and water. Follow up with a wire brush to remove any remaining corrosion.

Next, ensure your vehicle has ample coolant. Have your coolant flushed at the beginning of the season and replaced with a product suitable for your vehicle and temperatures where you drive. Check your radiator hoses by running your hands along their length to detect bulges or soft spots. Replace hoses that have either problem or rusty or damaged hose clamps.

Windshield washer fluid should also be matched to local temperatures. The solution that works fine during summer can freeze solid when temperatures drop. Keep an extra bottle or two of winter fluid in your vehicle on a long trip. Service stations and stores occasionally run out during snow and ice storms.

All-season tires might serve you well most of the year, but there are better options for brutally cold temperatures and snow-covered roads. Winter-specific tires feature a softer rubber compound and aggressive tread pattern to help "bite" into the snow. To maintain even traction, use winter tires on all four wheels.

In some locations, you may be allowed to use studded tires to handle icy conditions. However, these tires can damage road surfaces, so localities often limit their use to certain dates. Check the rules in your state before you buy.

Whatever tires you use, consistently monitor air pressure and tread during winter. When it's cold, the air inside your tires condenses, causing pressure to drop and reduce traction on snowy roads. Tread depth should be at least 6/32 inches for tires to grip the road in snow, approximately enough to cover the top of the Lincoln Memorial when using the "penny test."

Remember, making an inspection list and checking it twice beats being stranded on the road in snow and ice!

Additional information on driving safety is available at <https://safety.army.mil>.