

Preparing for Winter Weather



Know Your Risks

Pay attention to local weather reports and alerts for freezing temperatures and winter storms. Understanding the terminology used by the [National Weather Service](#) helps you respond appropriately:

- **Winter Storm Watch:** Issued when there's an increased possibility of hazardous winter weather. Typically released 24–48 hours before the event, when timing and severity are still uncertain. Use this time to prepare.
- **Winter Storm Warning:** Issued when hazardous winter weather like heavy snow, freezing rain, or sleet is imminent or occurring. Usually released 12–24 hours before the event. When this is issued, take immediate action: finalize preparations, stay off the roads, and stay safe indoors.
- **Winter Weather Advisory:** Conditions may be less severe than those associated with a warning, but snow, sleet, or freezing rain can still make travel hazardous.

Preparing Your Home

- **Inspect your heating system:** Have your furnace, chimney, or other heating equipment serviced by a qualified professional.
- **Use backup heat safely:** Keep space heaters at least three feet from anything that can burn and plug them directly into a wall outlet. Never use an oven or gas stovetop to heat your home.
- **Prevent carbon monoxide poisoning:** Install carbon monoxide detectors with battery backup. Generators must remain outdoors and at least 20 feet from doors, windows, and attached garages, never inside a home, garage, or enclosed porch.
- **Protect against the cold:** Seal drafts around windows and doors, insulate exposed pipes, and know how to shut off your home's water supply if a pipe bursts.
- **Check your gutters and roof:** Clear gutters when it is safe to do so to reduce the risk of ice dams and water damage.
- **Build an emergency supply kit:** Keep several days' worth of water, nonperishable food, necessary medications, flashlights, batteries, a first-aid kit, and a battery-powered or hand-crank radio. Plan for the needs of children, older adults, pets, and anyone who uses medical equipment.



Preparing Your Vehicle

Complete Seasonal Maintenance

- **Check your tires:** Inspect the tread and look for signs of damage. Use winter tires if appropriate for your location and driving conditions. Cold weather causes tire pressure to fall, so check it regularly and inflate tires to the pressure listed on the driver-side door label—not the maximum pressure printed on the tire.
- **Test the battery:** Cold temperatures reduce battery performance. Have an aging or unreliable battery tested before winter arrives.
- **Check your fluids:** Confirm that your coolant provides adequate freeze protection and use winter-rated windshield washer fluid.
- **Inspect your wipers and lights:** Replace worn wiper blades and make sure all exterior lights are clean and working.
- **Follow your vehicle's maintenance schedule:** Use the type and viscosity of oil specified by the vehicle manufacturer. Do not switch to a different oil solely because temperatures are falling unless your owner's manual recommends it.

Build a Winter Vehicle Kit

Your vehicle should have an emergency kit throughout the year, with seasonal items added as conditions change. Check the kit periodically and replace expired food, damaged supplies, and discharged batteries.

A winter kit might include:

- Blankets, hats, gloves, and warm clothing
- Flashlight and spare batteries
- Ice scraper and snow brush
- Small shovel
- Sand, non-clumping kitty litter, or another traction aid
- Reflective triangles or brightly colored markers
- Jumper cables or a portable jump starter
- Portable tire inflator and tire-pressure gauge
- Phone charging battery
- Water and nonperishable snacks
- First-aid kit
- Necessary medications

Consider Tire Chains

Chains may be helpful, or legally required, in some mountainous areas. Check local laws and your owner's manual before buying or installing them because chains are not suitable for every vehicle.

Practice installing them before winter. Only use chains when road conditions and local rules permit, remove them once you reach clear pavement, and follow the chain manufacturer's speed limit.

Make Smart Travel Choices

Avoid unnecessary travel when hazardous conditions are expected. If you must drive:

- Check the forecast and road conditions before leaving.
- Tell someone your route and expected arrival time.
- Clear all snow and ice from the windows, mirrors, lights, roof, and hood.
- Increase your following distance and reduce your speed.
- Accelerate, brake, and steer gently.
- Do not use cruise control on snowy or icy roads.
- If the vehicle begins to skid, remain calm, ease off the accelerator, and look and steer in the direction you want to travel. Avoid sudden braking or steering.
- Never use the parking or emergency brake to slow a moving vehicle on a slippery road unless your vehicle's manufacturer specifically instructs you to do so.

If You Become Stranded

Unless the vehicle is in a dangerous location, staying with it is generally safer than walking for help. Your vehicle provides shelter and is easier for rescuers to locate.

- Call for assistance and share your location.
- Turn on the hazard lights and attach a bright marker to the vehicle.
- Clear snow from the exhaust pipe before running the engine.
- Run the engine only periodically and long enough to maintain warmth.
- Never run the vehicle inside an enclosed space.
- Conserve phone power while keeping the phone available for emergency communication.
- Move periodically to maintain circulation, but avoid overexertion.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration offers additional [winter driving and vehicle-preparation guidance](#).

A Simple Winter Challenge

Choose one or two items from this list to complete each week over the next month. Check your heating system one week, your vehicle the next, and then build or refresh your emergency kits. By the time the snow begins to fall, you'll be ready for whatever winter brings.