

Winter Road Safety - Driving in Bad Weather

This article draws information from the Department of Licensing's [Washington Driver Guide](http://www.dol.wa.gov/driverslicense/guide.html) at <http://www.dol.wa.gov/driverslicense/guide.html>, the November 29, 2006 *Peninsula Daily News*, and a number of articles on the Internet – principally those at <http://www.smartmotorist.com/>.

General Considerations

- Clear snow, ice, frost or condensation from all windows before driving.
- Keep headlight and taillight lenses clean – when dirty, these can reduce effectiveness up to 50%.
- During winter months, keep the following 'winter gear' in your trunk or backseat: blankets, drinking water, quick energy foods, medications, chemical hand warmers (e.g., Hot Hands), extra gloves, socks, warm clothes, a tow strap, snow chains (with a plastic ground cover to use to install them), jumper cables, matches or a lighter, flashlight and extra batteries, a small snow shovel (with telescoping handle), road flares, cat litter or sand for traction, ice scraper, AM/FM radio with battery and some form of a first aid kit.
- If embarking on a trip, check road conditions elsewhere in the state (e.g., Hood Canal) via the Washington Department of Transportation web cams at <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/traffic/default.aspx?cam=1175>
- If you become stranded, **stay with your car**. Affix a red flag or cloth to your vehicle's antenna.

Lights

- By law, your vehicle's headlights must be turned on from a half hour after sunset until a half hour before sunrise.
- On rainy, snowy, or foggy days, it is sometimes difficult for other drivers to see your vehicle. In these conditions, headlights make your vehicle easier to see. Thus, a good rule-of-thumb is: **If you turn on your wipers, turn on your headlights.**

Slippery Roads – General

- Slow down at the first sign of rain, snow or sleet.
- On a wet road – reduce your speed by about 10 mph.
- On packed snow – cut your speed in half.
- On ice – slow to a crawl.
- In a very heavy rain, snowstorm, or thick fog, you may not be able to see more than 200 feet ahead. When you can not see any further than that, you can not safely drive faster than 30 mph.
- On slippery roads, because you need more distance to stop, leave more space in front of you.
- When it is raining or the road is wet, most tires have good traction up to about 35 mph. As you go faster, your tires will start to ride up on the water, like water skis. This is called *hydroplaning*. In a heavy rain, your tires can lose all traction at about 50 mph.
- Do not use 'Cruise Control' when driving in poor weather conditions. Although your vehicle will disable this feature with a tap on the brake, the difficulty can come if your tires lose traction (such as in a hydroplaning or skid situation). Here's one expert's caution:

"Your cruise control does not know the difference in road surface types," explains South Dakota Highway Patrol Trooper Mike Bock on his agency's Website. "This makes having it activated dangerous, because it will not allow you to slow down during a skid and you will continually accelerate. This does not allow you, the driver, to regain control of the vehicle."

Slippery Roads – Snow

- If at all possible, delay travel until the roads are plowed.
- Use a low gear for driving on snowy/snow-packed roads.
- As you approach STOP signs, slow down earlier than you normally would – this will provide you allowance for skidding forward on packed snow so that you won't overrun the STOP sign.
- Keep a close eye on traffic ahead of you.
- Avoid abrupt stops or other last-minute actions so you don't lose control.

Slippery Roads – Ice

- If at all possible, do not drive on icy roads. At a minimum, delay travel until the roads have been sanded.
- Slow down at intersections, off-ramps, bridges or shady areas that might have black ice.
- Give yourself extra time and distance to stop. Stopping on wet or icy roads without skidding takes more time.

Driving in the Fog

The best advice for drivers confronted with thick fog is to get off the road as soon as possible. If you can't avoid driving in the fog, then:

- Slow down. Most fog-related traffic fatalities occur because someone was driving too fast and couldn't stop in time to avoid a collision.
- Make sure that you can be seen. Turn on your fog lights (if you have them), and use low beams. High beams direct light up into the fog making it difficult for you to see. Low beams direct light down onto the road and help other drivers to see you.
- Use the right edge of the road (aka the fog line) as a guide rather than the centerline, to avoid running into oncoming traffic or becoming distracted by their headlights. In the event that the fog line is not visible, center-line road reflectors (where present) can be used for guidance.
- If you leave the road, be sure to pull off completely. Turn off your driving lights and turn on your four-way flashers so others know you're there but won't think you are driving on the road.
- Always use your defroster and windshield wipers in foggy conditions to keep the windows clear.
- Keep an eye on your speedometer and maintain a slow, constant speed.
- Remember that other drivers have a limited sight distance and that fog can leave roadways slick. Signals early, and when you use your brakes, don't stomp on them.

SUVs

- While the higher ground clearance and 4-wheel drive might help SUV owners get going in heavy snow, those special features do not help stop the vehicle. Drivers still need to slow down and increase the distance between vehicles when driving on slick roads.
- The higher center of gravity on some SUVs can make them more prone to roll over during sharp turning or when sidehill driving (i.e., driving on a tilted road surface) through snowdrifts – special care is needed to handle SUVs safely. Refer to your Owner's Manual for detailed guidance.

Other Considerations

- If the Washington State Patrol responds to a spinout, the driver will be cited for not maintaining control of the vehicle.
- Drivers should remain with their vehicle if it becomes disabled or is involved in a collision.
- Parking in the winter: If you park at the entrance to your driveway it will not be possible for an emergency vehicle to get to your home should the need arise. (Owners with steep driveways may not have a practical alternative; we don't want people parking on the roadsides unless their vehicles can get completely off the road.)