

Weathering Winter Storms

Winter has arrived. Bitter cold, driving winds and snow have hit nearly every region of the country.

Winter storms can bring cities to a halt, snarling roadways, closing airports and disrupting services. But severe winter weather is more than just inconvenient; it can be dangerous. Car accidents account for about 70 percent of injuries and death that occur during winter storms; another 25 percent result from people getting caught out in a storm.

Here are some tips to guard against the two major causes of injury and death associated with winter storms.

Driving in the Snow

The best way to avoid a car accident is to stay off the road. If you must drive in winter conditions, prepare before you go. Make sure car lights, breaks, windshield wipers (and no-freeze fluid) and battery are in working order. Check your antifreeze and install winter tires with good treads. Maintain at least a half tank of gas for emergency use and to keep the fuel line from freezing. Carry an emergency preparedness kit and keep your cell phone charged.

Always wear your seat belt. And never drink and drive. Travel in the day, try not to drive



alone and keep others informed of your route and schedule. Listen to the radio for the latest road conditions. Stay on main roads whenever possible. And don't overestimate your ability to drive in bad conditions like sleet, freezing rain, freezing drizzle and dense fog. Be aware that bridges, ramps and overpasses may freeze first.

Turn on your lights to see and be seen. Slow down and put extra distance between you and the car in front of you. If you need to stop, know what your brakes will do: In general, press firmly on anti-lock brakes and keep the pedal depressed (even if it begins to shake). Pump non-antilock brakes to avoid locking your wheels and causing the car to slide. If your car starts to slide, turn your wheels in the direction of the skid to straighten out.

Caught Out in a Winter Storm

To avoid being stranded out in a storm, listen for winter storm or blizzard warnings—and stay inside when they are issued. If you are caught outdoors, find shelter as soon as possible. Stay dry and cover all body parts. If there is no shelter available, build a wind-break or snow cave for protection. Light a fire for heat and to attract attention. Eat and drink to retain energy (body heat) and avoid dehydration. But, don't eat snow; it will lower your body temperature. Instead, melt it for drinking water.

If you are stranded in your car or truck:

Stay inside the vehicle: Do not set out on foot unless you can see a building close by. Be careful; Blowing-snow distorts distances and disorientation occurs quickly. Run the motor about 10 minutes each hour for heat. When the engine is running, open a window for fresh air to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning. Make sure the exhaust pipe is not blocked.

Make yourself visible: Turn on the dome light at night when running the engine. Tie a colored cloth (red is best) to the antenna or door. After snow stops falling, raise the hood to signal you need help.

Work together: If more than one person is in the vehicle, take turns sleeping. Huddle together for warmth.

Eat, drink, and exercise: From time to time, move arms, fingers and toes to keep blood circulating and to keep warm. Avoid alcohol or caffeinated beverages. They dehydrate the body.

Be Prepared

The best protection against the hazards of winter storms is to be prepared. See the attached “Winter Storm Safety Checklist” and visit these sites for additional information:

<http://www.osha.gov> <http://www.redcross.org>

<http://www.fema.gov> <http://www.nws.noaa.gov>

Cold Stress Illness

Prolonged exposure to cold can result in frostbite and hypothermia.

Frostbite is a severe reaction to cold exposure. It occurs when the skin freezes and loses water. Frostbite typically affects the feet and hands. Stinging or aching followed by numbness and white or pale skin are signs of frostbite. If you suspect frostbite, do not rub the area to warm it. Wrap it in soft warm cloth, move the person to a warm area, and contact medical personnel.

Hypothermia is a dangerous lowering of the body's core temperature and occurs when the body loses heat faster than it can produce it. Warning signs include uncontrollable shivering, mental confusion, slowed speech, loss of coordination, drowsiness and exhaustion. If you suspect hypothermia, get the person to a warm location and call for emergency medical help. Start warming the body slowly. Change into dry clothing and wrap entire body in warm blankets, covering the head. Warm the core first. Do not give alcohol or caffeinated beverages. Give a warm (not hot) sugary drink or warm broth instead. These procedures are not substitutes for proper medical care.

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Be Red Cross Ready

Winter Storm Safety Checklist

Winter storms can range from a moderate snow over a few hours to a blizzard with blinding, wind-driven snow that lasts for several days. Some winter storms are large enough to affect several states, while others affect only a single community. Many winter storms are accompanied by dangerously low temperatures and sometimes by strong winds, icing, sleet and freezing rain.

Know the Difference

Winter Storm Outlook

Winter storm conditions are possible in the next 2 to 5 days.

Winter Weather Advisory

Winter weather conditions are expected to cause significant inconveniences and may be hazardous. When caution is used, these situations should not be life threatening.

Winter Storm Watch

Winter storm conditions are possible within the next 36 to 48 hours. People in a watch area should review their winter storm plans and stay informed about weather conditions.

Winter Storm Warning

Life-threatening, severe winter conditions have begun or will begin within 24 hours. People in a warning area should take precautions immediately.

What should I do?



- Dress in several layers of lightweight clothing, wear mittens and a hat (preferably one that covers your ears).
- Wear waterproof, insulated boots to keep your feet warm and dry and to maintain your footing in ice and snow.
- Minimize travel. If travel is necessary, keep a disaster supplies kit in your vehicle.
- Listen to a NOAA Weather Radio or other local news channels for critical information from the National Weather Service (NWS).
- Winterize your vehicle and keep the gas tank full. A full tank will keep the fuel line from freezing.
- Insulate your home by installing storm windows or covering windows with plastic from the inside to keep cold air out.
- Maintain heating equipment and chimneys by having them cleaned and inspected every year.
- Bring pets/companion animals inside during winter weather. Move other animals or livestock to sheltered areas with non-frozen drinking water.
- Running water, even at a trickle, helps prevent pipes from freezing.
- All fuel-burning equipment should be vented to the outside and kept clear.

Cold-Related Emergencies

- Frostbite and hypothermia are two dangerous and potentially life-threatening emergencies. Learn how to care for these emergencies by taking a first aid class.

What supplies do I need?



- Water—at least a 3-day supply; one gallon per person per day
- Food—at least a 3-day supply of non-perishable, easy-to-prepare food
- Flashlight
- Battery-powered or hand-crank radio (NOAA Weather Radio, if possible)
- Extra batteries
- First aid kit
- Medications (7-day supply) and medical items (hearing aids with extra batteries, glasses, contact lenses, syringes, cane)
- Multi-purpose tool
- Sanitation and personal hygiene items
- Copies of personal documents (medication list and pertinent medical information, proof of address, deed/lease to home, passports, birth certificates, insurance policies)
- Cell phone with chargers
- Family and emergency contact information
- Extra cash
- Baby supplies (bottles, formula, baby food, diapers)
- Pet supplies (collar, leash, ID, food, carrier, bowl)
- Tools/supplies for securing your home
- Sand, rock salt or non-clumping kitty litter to make walkways and steps less slippery
- Warm coats, gloves or mittens, hats, boots and extra blankets and warm clothing for all household members
- Ample alternate heating methods such as fireplaces or wood- or coal-burning stoves

What do I do after a storm?



- Go to a designated public shelter if your home loses power or heat during periods of extreme cold.
- Avoid driving when conditions include sleet, freezing rain or drizzle, snow or dense fog.
- Before tackling strenuous tasks in cold temperatures, consider your physical condition, the weather factors and the nature of the task.
- Protect yourself from frostbite and hypothermia by wearing warm, loose-fitting, lightweight clothing in several layers. Stay indoors, if possible.
- Help people who require special assistance such as elderly people living alone, people with disabilities and children.
- Check on your animals and make sure that their access to food and water is not blocked by snow drifts, ice or other obstacles. If possible, bring them indoors.

Caution: Carbon Monoxide Kills

- Never use a generator, grill, camp stove or other gasoline, propane, natural gas or charcoal-burning devices inside a home, garage, basement, crawlspace or any partially enclosed area. Locate unit away from doors, windows and vents that could allow carbon monoxide to come indoors.
- The primary hazards to avoid when using alternate sources for electricity, heating or cooking are carbon monoxide poisoning, electric shock and fire.
- Install carbon monoxide alarms in central locations on every level of your home and outside sleeping areas to provide early warning of accumulating carbon monoxide.
- If the carbon monoxide alarm sounds, move quickly to a fresh air location outdoors or by an open window or door.
- Call for help from the fresh air location and remain there until emergency personnel arrive to assist you.

Let Your Family Know You're Safe

If your community experiences a severe winter storm, or any disaster, register on the American Red Cross Safe and Well Web site available through RedCross.org to let your family and friends know about your welfare. If you don't have Internet access, call 1-866-GET-INFO to register yourself and your family.