

# WINTER SAFETY

Secrets to Keep You Alive



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# CHAPTER 3

## DRIVING IN WINTER

Driving on a nice mountain highway with the roads plowed and sanded a few days after a blizzard can be breathtaking. Driving the same highway during a blizzard can be breathtaking also. Breathtaking in a bad way. You can find yourself in a very serious situation if caught in a blizzard, a situation you may have been able to avoid. The following are some ideas to keep in mind when traveling in the winter.

### THE WHITE STUFF CAN KILL

*A woman was driving through a national park during a blizzard. Unfortunately, the poor road conditions caused her to lose control of her vehicle. The car slid off the road and rolled down an embankment. Although she was only a few meters from the highway, the leg and arm she had fractured in the crash prevented her from exiting the vehicle. Her car was spotted by a grader operator who was plowing the road the next day, but by the time the operator reached the woman, she had frozen to death.*

In most areas of North America, blizzards can hit almost anywhere. Blizzards deserve the same respect that we would pay a hurricane. Many of us who hear of a blizzard warning will carry on as if there weren't any danger, but blizzards warrant preparation and caution.

The combination of snow, strong winds, cold temperatures and reduced visibility (due to the blowing snow) can be deadly.

*One winter when I was driving a snowplow along the Jasper-Banff highway, my colleague and I were about to close the road due to a blizzard*

*when we came across a man who had lost control of his vehicle. He had been there at least two hours. There was very little traffic, so he was happy to see us. The man was dressed in summer loafers, dress pants and a light fall jacket. He had no mitts, toque, shovel or any other type of survival gear, and was almost out of gas. Obviously, this man was not prepared for what could have become a life-threatening situation.*

Here are a few recommended precautions for driving in winter:

- Don't travel in a blizzard unless it's absolutely necessary. If you must travel, call the local authorities to see what condition the roads you are planning to travel are in. Monitor conditions on the radio. Always travel with a full tank of gas, extra warm clothes including winter boots, mitts, a warm hat and a sleeping bag.
- Also carry a shovel, tire chains, road flares, a bag of sand, an emergency food pack, booster cables, matches and a lighter, several candles to help start a fire if you need to, a flashlight (if you have to change a flat tire at night you will be glad you had one) a fire extinguisher, a hatchet or axe and some snacks.
- If you get stuck in a blizzard, stay in your car, run it for 10 minutes with the heater on then shut it off. You don't want to waste gas. Make sure you keep the exhaust pipe clear of snow and keep a window open on the leeward (downwind) side of the vehicle. This will help ventilation and reduce the chance of carbon monoxide poisoning.
- Be prepared to build a snow shelter if ever you run out of gas and are stranded in a blizzard. At temperatures approaching minus 25°F (-30°C) a candle just won't give you enough warmth to survive if you're in a vehicle made of two tons of steel and glass. Your vehicle will quickly turn into one large icebox. If you don't believe me, try it. Sit in your car with light clothes on when it's very cold out and light a candle. See if that would keep you warm all night. You have to be prepared!

## ON BEING PREPARED

In most cases, being prepared can help prevent you from finding yourself in a life-threatening situation. If you travel in the winter time and especially in remote areas, it is crucial that you be prepared. People have survived many days in brutal conditions because they were prepared. On the other hand, people have died overnight in conditions that were not really severe. The difference is that one group is prepared both physically and mentally while other people panicked, gave up and died. Being prepared can save your life.

Not planning to travel? It's still a good idea to blizzard-proof your home or workplace. Stock up on necessities – fuel, oil, food, medications, diapers for the kids, milk – whatever you need to make sure everyone is fed, safe and warm until the danger passes.

## FREEZING RAIN

In the spring, fall or winter, you could find yourself in a vehicle, out of control and scared spitless because of freezing rain. Whether you're the driver or a passenger, this experience is terrifying.



Being scared half to death might make life exciting and make you feel glad to be alive, but only if you manage to remain alive. Too many people who are caught in a car sliding out of control on ice do not make it to their destination and end up in the morgue instead.

When conditions are right, rain droplets become supercooled. Then, when they hit an object such as a branch or a road, they freeze almost instantly, creating a thin sheet of ice that is extremely slippery and in most cases very hard to detect – whether you are walking or driving. Without warning, you can suddenly find yourself driving on an extremely slippery road or doing a fancy jig on the sidewalk. If you're driving, freezing rain isn't just trouble for you, but for everyone in the vehicle, not to mention the unsuspecting chap who is driving towards you in the opposite direction.

In North America, no area is immune to freezing rain. Everyone needs to know how to deal the challenges it presents. Consider taking these precautions.

- If possible, delay your travel plans. If you listen to the radio warnings about freezing rain and then hop in your vehicle for a 40 mile (60 km) drive, you're asking for trouble.
- Wait for the sanding trucks. It's amazing the difference it makes to have a bit of sand on the ice.
- If you suspect you've hit some ice or that the rain is beginning to freeze, do this test to gauge the condition of the road: when you feel it's safe to do so, gently apply the brakes. If you learn that the roads are slippery only when you have to take evasive action, it's probably too late.
- Make sure your tires are in good condition. Bald tires are a hazard even on roads that are bare and dry.

Be careful, and slow down!