

Guide to driving in winter



Sainsbury's Bank

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Getting your car ready for adverse weather can be easy with a few simple steps and can help keep you safe when driving in winter. This guide offers information and tips on how to prepare for winter driving, and what to do if poor weather conditions cause you problems while on the road.



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Prepare your car for winter

Winter tyres

It's worth thinking about purchasing a set of winter tyres. This is not a legal requirement in the UK, but it can be a sensible investment. Winter tyres make your car easier to control on snow and ice and also perform better than summer tyres in rain, or when the temperature drops below 7C.

Maintenance checks

It's a good idea to perform simple [car maintenance checks](#) all year round, but especially during the winter months. This should include checking that all the fluids are properly topped up, the tyres are in good condition, and the battery is fully charged. A professional mechanic can carry out these checks for you, if you are unsure. It's also worth asking a mechanic to carry out a full, pre-winter check.



Tyre tread and pressure

All tyres must have a minimum of 1.6mm of tread. You can ask a mechanic to check the tread for you, or use a tyre-depth gauge - available from most high street motoring outlets for around £5.

When you go to a petrol station to fill up your car, it's worth checking that your tyre pressure is at the right level, using the tyre inflator. You'll find the correct pressure levels in your car manufacturer's handbook. It can sometimes also be found on a sticker in the frame of the driver's door, or on the inside of the fuel filler cap.

Battery

If you notice that your car is taking longer to start in the mornings, visit your local garage to get the battery checked. Remember, you'll most likely be using your lights, heater, wipers and heated windows more in winter, which can put extra strain on the battery.

Lights

Lights don't just help you see what's around you on the road, they let others see you. All of your car's lights should be clean, whole and fully operational, including sidelights, indicators and fog lights. Ask a friend to help you check that the brake lights are working properly by standing behind the car as you press the brake.

If any light isn't working, change the bulb straight away or ask a mechanic to do it for you. Not fixing a faulty light could result in a fine. It's also a good idea to give your headlights a wipe with a kitchen towel at the start of every journey.

Washer fluid

You'll get through more windscreen wash when the roads are dirty, snowy or wet, so it's worth topping up every couple of days. You may also want to keep a spare container full of washer fluid in the boot, in case you run out while on a journey.

Wipers

Wipers should be able to keep the screen clear, rather than just moving dirt across the window, so make sure they are in good condition. It could be worth investing in new blades in the run up to winter, and buying a second set to keep in the boot. If the blades are damaged or working poorly, replace them.

Fuel

Aim to keep your fuel topped up, with the needle in the top half of the gauge at all times. Having some extra fuel in the tank is a good idea, as you may be able to run the engine and stay warm if your car breaks down on a road. Note that [if your car breaks down on the motorway](#) , you should get out of the car and wait for help at a safe distance.

Antifreeze

This is what stops the water in your car's engine from freezing in subzero temperatures. Your car manufacturer's handbook should tell you the correct mixture of antifreeze and water for your model and make. Your local garage will also be able to check this and correct the water to antifreeze ratio, if required, as part of a pre-winter check.

Winter driving equipment

It's sensible to keep the following items in the car during the winter months.

Window scraper and de-icer

Use a proper scraper to clear your windows of snow, frost and ice. A can of de-icer may also be useful, as it can help clear your windows quicker. In winter, windows can freeze up during the day as well as overnight.

Mobile phone charger

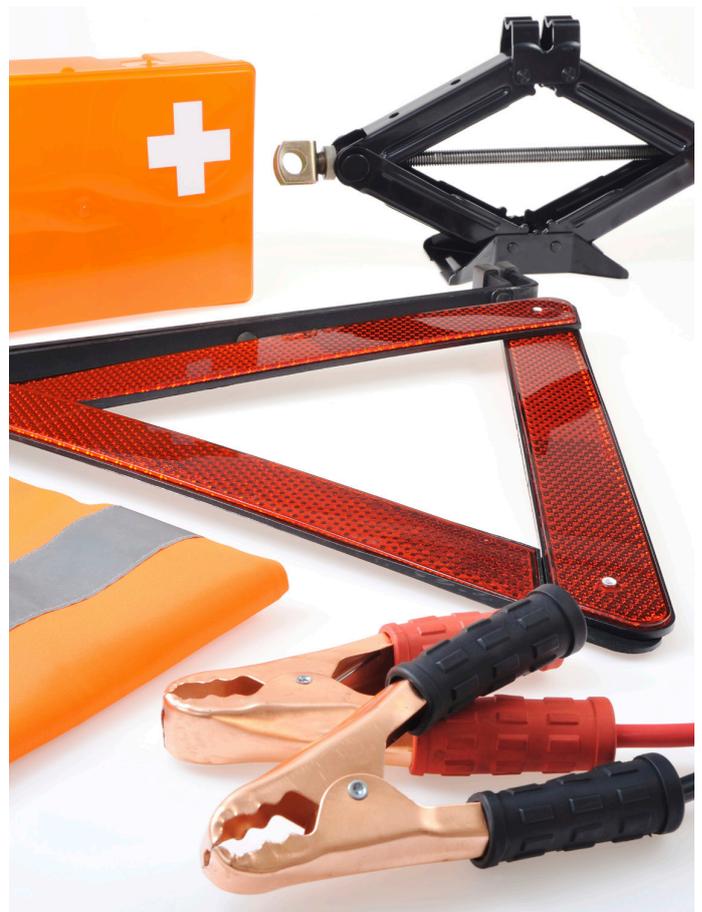
Keep a mobile phone charger or USB cable in your car, to ensure you can charge a low phone battery and call for help in case of an emergency. A hands-free set for your phone may also be a good idea.

Warning triangle & high-visibility vest

If your car breaks down on a road, a warning triangle will alert other traffic to your presence and make it easier for emergency services to find you.

It should be placed at least 45 metres behind your car, on the same side of the road. Never attempt to use a warning triangle on a motorway.

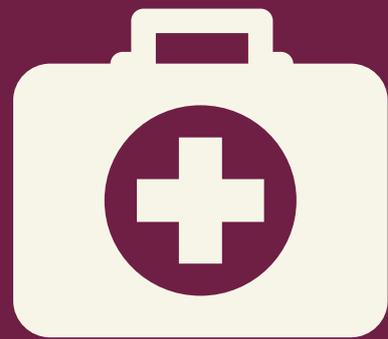
It's also worth keeping a good reflective vest in your car. They don't cost much and can be seen from a long way off, if you are stranded by a road or motorway.



Breakdown kit

Available from all good motoring outlets, a breakdown kit contains much of the equipment you may need in an emergency, in one handy pack. They vary in price from around £15 up to roughly £80, depending on how basic or comprehensive they are, and may include things like:

- warning triangle
- torch
- high-visibility vest
- first aid kit
- fire extinguisher
- seat belt cutter
- escape hammer (to break windows with)



Other items to consider:

- jump lead cables
- tow rope - it's best not to rely on someone else having one
- torch - keep one in the car, plus a spare set of batteries, if needed
- thermal blanket and gloves
- warm, waterproof clothing and dry, comfortable shoes
- snacks, like cereal bars
- drinks - bottles of water; flask with hot drink to help keep you warm
- a small spade to clear snow away from your wheels
- a piece of old carpet and a bag of salt, to help give your tyres grip
- up-to-date maps / GPS kit
- car manufacturer's handbook

How to drive in winter

Before you head out

Check the weather forecast and traffic information for your route. If the weather is exceptionally poor and your trip isn't essential, it may be better to stay indoors and off the roads.

Clear the car

If the drive can't be avoided, make sure you clear all the ice from the windows, get the heater going, and switch on the heated rear window before you head off. Remove any snow from the roof and bonnet, to avoid the possibility of snow sliding into - and blocking - your view while driving.

Driving in snow

Take your time

Give yourself plenty of extra time when planning a trip in winter weather. Not rushing will give you space to clear the car properly and help minimise stress.

Slow down and avoid sudden input

Your car won't grip as well or stop as quickly in snow, so it's a good idea to slow down. Speed limits are the maximum in good weather conditions - in difficult weather, they may well be too fast. Avoid sudden input, like harsh braking / acceleration, or sharp steering.

Keep your distance

Snow and ice make stopping distances 10 times longer. Leave significantly more space than usual between you and the car in front - it's recommended you stay at least 20 seconds behind the car in front of you on an icy road.

Braking on snow and ice

Brake early and gently to avoid your car's anti-lock braking system activating. Braking in a snow or ice covered bend can be very risky - slow down in plenty of time.

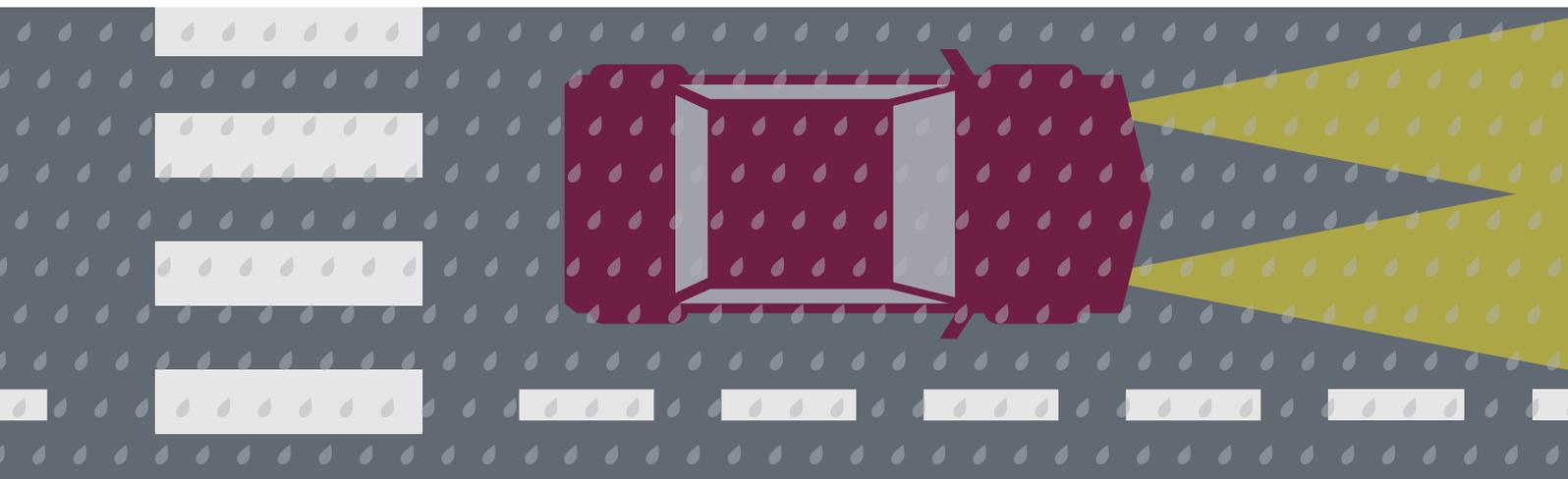
If you start to skid

Ease your foot off the accelerator pedal and let the car slow down itself, if possible. Try not to brake, as this is likely to make the car skid more. If you feel the car starting to spin, gently steer into the direction you want the car to go and let it straighten itself up again. Most new cars have stability control systems that will help you regain control in these circumstances.

If you get stuck in snow

Try slowly moving the car back and forth, out of the rut, using the highest gear possible. Revving your engine is likely to make the rut worse, rather than power you out of it. A piece of carpet and some road salt can help provide extra grip for your tyres. If you can't get loose, ask any passersby to help by giving you a push.

If you get caught in a snow drift and can't get out, stay in your car and call your breakdown service, or the emergency services. Avoid running the engine to keep warm.



Driving in rain

Slow down

As with any difficult weather, it's a good idea to slow down. Your car can take almost twice as long to stop as it would on a dry road.

Use dipped headlights

It's best not to rely on your daytime running lights, because your rear lights will be unlit. Instead, switch on your dipped headlights.

Avoid puddles

If the rain is heavy, water will tend to gather at the side of the road. If this happens, try to edge slightly farther out, so your left-side wheels don't get snagged by puddles.

Ploughing through puddles will cause 'bow waves' that can blind oncoming traffic and soak cyclists and pedestrians.

Aquaplaning

Driving too fast into road surface water can cause your car to aquaplane. This is when the tyre tread can't channel away enough water and the tyres lose contact with the road, lifting your car off the surface and causing it to skid. You should feel this instantly, as the steering will go light in your hands.

You can help avoid aquaplaning by slowing down and ensuring your tyres have the correct tyre pressure and tyre tread depth. If you do start to skid, ease off the accelerator and allow the car to slow down. It should regain grip almost immediately. Try not to brake, as this too is likely to cause the car to skid.

Flooded roads

If the water on a flooded road is deep or you are unsure of the depth, check to see if there is an alternative route you can take. If not, avoid the deepest water, which is usually near the curb.

If you have no choice but to drive across a flooded section of a road:

- Drive slowly in first gear.
- Keep the engine speed high by slipping the clutch, to keep the car from stalling.
- Test the brakes when you have passed through the flooded section, to ensure they work.





Driving in high winds

Gusts can happen at any time, but are often particularly strong on bridges, open stretches of road, or when you're passing larger vehicles. The following tips can help you manoeuvre windy weather more confidently.

- Slow down to minimise the effect that any sudden gusts of wind can have on your direction of travel.
- Drive with both hands on the wheel; you'll be able to steer against high winds and sudden gusts more quickly and smoothly.
- Keep your distance from all other road users - especially motorcyclists, caravans and high-sided vehicles, which could be blown into your path.
- Be on the lookout for and avoid debris on the road, such as branches and house slates.

If you break down on a windy day:

- Park your car in a safe place - if possible, pull away from the road and avoid parking under trees or next to walls.
- If you can, leave the vehicle and wait for help in a safe spot - other vehicles could be blown into your parked car.

Driving in low winter sun

Wet, shiny roads and a low winter sun can be a tiring combination, as you may need to squint to see what's on the road ahead of you. Consider the following:

- Keep a pair of sunglasses in the car - prescription if required. Take them off if the weather turns dull, as they tend to reduce your ability to see.
- Make sure your windows are free from cracks and scratches - these can exacerbate the glare of the sun.
- Clean your windows inside and out, as the low winter sun will make grease and smears more difficult to see through.

Driving in fog

Fog can be one of the most difficult and dangerous conditions to drive in, so it's a good idea to avoid it if you can. Your visibility will be severely compromised and your windscreen may mist over repeatedly.

If you have no choice but to drive in fog, here are some pointers to bear in mind.

- Check your car and make sure everything is in good working order - especially the lights - before you head out.
- As you enter the fog, check your mirror so you know if there's a car behind you, and how far back it is. Always check your mirrors before slowing down.
- Slow down. Some drivers inadvertently speed up once they become 'used' to the fog, so keep an eye on your speed throughout the journey.
- Aim to maintain a gap of at least three seconds between yourself and the car ahead. Try not to latch on to another car's tail lights, as you will most likely be too close to brake safely.
- Don't accelerate in order to put distance between yourself and a car behind you.
- Keep your headlights on dipped beam, and switch on your windscreen demister and wipers. It's best not to use your full beam because this will merely reflect back at you off the fog, shortening the distance you can see ahead.
- Before setting off, make sure you know which buttons operate the front and rear fog lights. Don't use the rear fog lights if you can see a driver behind you, as you may dazzle them. If the road you're on has streetlights, you are unlikely to need your fog lights on.
- Turn off distracting noises, like the radio or CD player. In a crossroad or junction with limited visibility, consider winding the windows down slightly to listen for traffic before driving through.
- If you break down in fog, get out of the car and to a place of safety as quickly as possible, then call the police.

Where to find out more

You'll find more information about driving in adverse weather at [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) .



- 1) <https://www.sainsburysbank.co.uk/car-insurance/guides/car-maintenance-basics>
- 2) <https://www.sainsburysbank.co.uk/~media/files/resources/guide-to-car-breakdown-basics.pdf>
- 3) <https://www.gov.uk/driving-adverse-weather-conditions-226-to-237/icy-and-snowy-weather-228-to-231>

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