

Winter Driving Techniques

Not all of the winter skills you'll use involve snowshoes. Just to get to the trailhead you may need to know how to drive on snow and ice on mountain roads. Sooner or later, whether it's on a Mountaineers trip or a trip of your own, you're likely to encounter snowy roads. Since Puget Sound's rare snowfalls don't give a driver much of a chance to practice, it may help to read about some basic techniques for winter driving before you find yourself on that patch of ice on I-90. Although the Washington highways are repeatedly dozed/sanded/salted, a few situations warrant special attention. Changing lanes should be done carefully on snowy roads because you may have to cross snowy patches to get into the next lane. Always reduce speed when approaching a curve or turn in the road. Of course, be sure to use your signals.

Getting There and Home Safely

Oftentimes you'll encounter different road conditions on the way back home, when you're tired. Warming temperatures or even the heat generated by traffic tires can cause water to sit on top of compact snow. This can be very slippery. Melting can occur on the road during the day then refreeze the moment the sun goes down. Black ice can look just like a bare road surface but is extremely treacherous. It can occur at altitudes and temperatures where the snow has turned to freezing rain or drizzle - or any place where meltwater has frozen on the road surface. Remember that ice at 32°F is twice as slick as ice at 0°F. Be alert and be prepared for sudden changes in road conditions.

Vehicle Preparations and Helpful Hints

Make sure your car is in good working order. In particular, check all fluid levels, tire condition and tire pressure. All-season or Mud/Snow/All-Weather tires are generally preferable. Tread depth should be at least one-eighth inch for it to grip in the snow. You should also have chains along on your travels. Wiper blades should be in good condition, and should be set upright and away from the windshield when parked in freezing or potentially freezing weather.

Spraying a shot of dry lubricant into door latches will help keep them from freezing up. You may wish not to set your parking brake when you leave your car or it may freeze solid while you are gone. Keeping a lighter or match with you (not in the car) can be helpful when you get back to the car. If the lock does freeze, try heating the key before inserting it into the lock. The key should warm up the lock enough for it to work again.

Chaining Up

You may be required to put chains on your tires at the mountain passes and above Longmire at Mt. Rainier. Four-wheel drive and all-wheel drive vehicles may usually proceed without chains when chains are required, but they still must have a set of chains inside the vehicle, available to put on. Chains not only provide better traction when climbing hills, they also help provide the necessary drag for better control when descending hills. All chains come with instructions. Read them ahead of time, practice putting the chains on your tires and be sure to keep the instructions with the chains in the car. Be sure to put the chains on the tires for your drive axle. On a front-wheel drive car, that would be the front wheels and on a rear-wheel drive car that would be the rear wheels. Having a pair of pliers and a screwdriver is also handy to accompany your traction devices. You may check the driving conditions at the mountain passes, as well as the current traction requirements, at <https://www.wsdot.com/traffic/passes>.

Driving

Drive slowly and take your time. Patience pays off in safety. Don't follow too closely and resist the urge to travel too fast while in snowy/icy conditions. It takes much longer to stop your vehicle while driving on snow and ice. Accelerate and brake gently. Avoid accelerating and braking while on ice – if at all possible utilize bare patches to assist you in keeping your vehicle under control. Bare patches in the road allow the tires a place to grip but remember they may be covered with a layer of ice. Roadside reflectors can assist you in identification of the edge of the road. Always travel with your headlights on and on low beam.

Getting Stuck

If your car does get stuck in the snow and help is not within certain reach, it is usually safer to stay in your car until help arrives or until the weather changes than to wander out in the environment. Use some of the emergency items listed in the following checklist to keep you comfortable. If you run your engine for the heater, do so only for a few minutes at a time, saving on gas and being sure to ventilate the car.

Parking

Keep in mind that many winter parking areas require a Sno-Park permit (available at most outdoor stores). Be sure that you have parked in a legal area as designated in the Sno-Park brochure. Recreational parking is not allowed on highways, off-ramps, interchanges, or under overpasses. If possible, park your car facing downhill, and back into your parking place. If your battery should die, it will be much easier to jumpstart if the engine is accessible to the rescue vehicle. It is easier to get out of a parking place if you can put your car in Drive rather than in Reverse. Select a parking place where others are not likely to slide into it.