

Severe Winter Storms

We do encounter severe storms in the Shenandoah Valley during autumn, winter and early spring that take the form of ice, snow, and freezing rain. When the forecast calls for severe winter weather, be sure to monitor your local radio, TV or NOAA Weather Radio stations for updated information. Listen for winter-related watches and warnings. The safest place to be during a winter storm is indoors. Winter driving is often very difficult due to blowing snow, icy slick spots and fewer daylight hours.

When severe winter weather threatens your area, it's essential that you listen to your local radio and TV stations for updated information. Make sure you are familiar with the various winter-related watches and warnings.

Winter Weather Advisory: Declared when winter weather conditions are expected to cause difficulty and might be dangerous. With caution, these situations should not become life-threatening.

Winter Storm Watch: Severe winter conditions, such as heavy snow or ice, are possible within the next day or two. Prepare now.

Winter Storm Warning: Severe winter conditions have begun or are about to begin in your area. Stay indoors.

Blizzard Warning: Snow and strong winds will combine to produce blinding snow with near zero visibility, deep drifts and life-threatening wind chill. Seek shelter immediately.

Know the Dangers

When you are outside during cold weather, you need to be careful. It's **extremely** important to:

Dress warmly
Stay dry
Come inside before you get too cold or tired

Or you can suffer from one of these life-threatening conditions:

Frostbite - is damage that happens to your skin and body when it is exposed to cold for too long. Hands, feet, ears and noses are often frostbitten. These areas become pale, cold and hard and may be numb or achy. If damage is too great, the affected area must be removed by a doctor.

Hypothermia - This happens when the core temperature of your body drops below 95 degrees. (Your body temperature is normally 98.6 degrees.) When your temperature gets that low, your body can't function; shivering and poor coordination lead to unconsciousness and, if untreated, death.

Winter Travel

Before you leave

During a winter storm ask yourself, "Is this trip really necessary?" If you decide the trip cannot be delayed, check on weather conditions along your travel route. Listen to weather forecasts on TV, local radio stations or NOAA Weather Radio. Call to get current road conditions for Virginia's interstate and freeway systems. Information is updated every two hours during a storm.

Tell someone at home (a friend, relative or co-worker) you are taking a trip, where you are going, the routes you will travel and when you expect to arrive. When you reach your destination make a call to report that you have arrived.

Before you leave town, fill your gas tank. While traveling, frequently refill the gas tank. The stops will relieve tense muscles. When you stop, don't flaunt large amounts of cash. Keep valuable items out of sight. Avoid talking with strangers. Stop at well-lit, well-traveled facilities.

Do not leave without a Winter Travel Survival Kit.

Keep your windows clear of snow and ice. Do not start until your windshield is defrosted.

If you become stranded

If your vehicle breaks down, pull as far off the road as possible. Your greatest personal danger at this point is that of being hit by passing cars. Don't panic. Use common sense!

Stay in the car. You may become disoriented and lost while wandering in a snowstorm, making it more difficult for rescuers to find you.

If you have a cell phone, call for help.

Display a trouble sign. Tie a piece of brightly colored cloth (red is good) to your car's antenna as a distress signal.

Occasionally run the engine to keep warm. Turn on your car's engine for 10 minutes each hour. Run the heater during this time.

Beware of carbon monoxide poisoning. Clear away snow from the exhaust pipe and open a downwind window slightly for ventilation.

If it is dark, turn on your car's interior light to make it easier for rescuers to find you.

Avoid overexertion. Cold weather puts added strain on the heart. Shoveling snow or pushing the car in freezing temperatures could bring on a heart attack or make other medical conditions worse.

Watch for signs of hypothermia or frostbite. Symptoms of hypothermia include uncontrollable shivering, memory lapses and drowsiness. White or pale fingers, toes, nose and ears are likely to be frostbitten. Warm the torso area first and work outward finishing with the extremities. Occasionally moving arms and legs will stimulate circulation.

Maintenance

To minimize the possibility of breakdown, winterize your vehicle following the suggested maintenance schedule included in the owner's manual, or have your vehicle serviced by a reputable dealer, garage or mechanic.

Check your wipers, tires (use all-weather tires, if possible), lights, and fluid levels (radiator, windshield washer, power steering, oil and brakes) regularly. Make sure the brakes and transmission are working properly. Lubricate door and trunk locks with lock lubricant to prevent them from freezing.

On the road

Buckle your seat belts!

Brake properly to avoid skids. If the pavement is snow- or ice-covered, start slowly and brake gently. Begin braking early when you come to an intersection. If you start to slide, ease off the gas pedal or brakes. Steer into the direction of the skid until you feel you have regained traction, then straighten your vehicle. If you have anti-lock brakes, apply steady pressure.

Be prepared to turn back and seek shelter if conditions become threatening.

In fog, drive with headlights set on dim, or use fog lights. If the fog is too dense, pull off the roadway and stop. Do not drive dangerously slowly.

In rain, fog, snow or sleet, stay within the limits of your vision.

Drive slowly and increase your following distance. Your speed should be adjusted for the conditions and should match the flow of traffic.

As roadway conditions may vary depending on the sun, shade or roadway surface, watch for slick spots (especially under bridges, on overpasses and in shaded spots). Be prepared to react physically and mentally.

Be alert for snow plows. When a snow plow is coming towards you, allow plenty of room for the plow to pass; its blade may cross the center line.

When you approach a snow plow from behind, pass with care and only when you can see the road ahead of the plow. You should not try to pass in blowing snow as there may be a vehicle obscured by the cloud of snow. Allow extra distance between you and the plow as it may be spreading salt.

Be alert when you approach a cloud of snow that covers the road, especially on passing lanes of interstates or freeways. A snow plow may be at work clearing the lane or preparing to turn around.

Be careful after any minor accident. If you are bumped from behind and you do not feel comfortable exiting your vehicle, motion the other driver and drive to the nearest police station, 24-hour store, service station, hospital or fire station.

Information compiled from the Virginia Department of Emergency Management

<http://www.vaemergency.com/>