
Safe winter driving

Well, the weather in Ohio is about to change and I don't know about everyone else, but I get pretty nervous driving in winter weather conditions. The cold, blizzards, blowing wind, ice and slippery conditions are some of the hazards that make me anxious. However, to make this time of the year more bearable, I like to ensure I am prepared for the unexpected. You and your organization should do the same thing: prepare your staff by reviewing safe driving techniques, create an emergency kit and prepare your company vehicles. Safe driving in the winter requires extra caution and preparation due to challenging conditions like snow, ice and reduced visibility. Developing a program to assist employees with the unexpected is a great way to prepare them if they are caught in one of those scary situations. Prepping your fleet vehicles or personal cars, ensuring emergency equipment is available, and training employees on safe driving techniques can help lower anxiety when confronting these conditions.

Vehicle preparation

Tires: If possible, install winter tires, as they provide better traction in the snow. If not, check the tread depth to ensure proper grip when driving through the snow. Tires need more tread depth in wintry conditions to maintain traction. It is recommended that tires have at least 5/32" of remaining tread depth because it allows snow to be compressed in the grooves and released as the tire rolls, improving stability.

Battery: Ensure your battery is fully charged and in good condition, as cold weather can reduce its cranking amps. Many batteries have a lifespan of only 3-5 years, and as they get older, they may struggle to start the vehicle in colder conditions. If your battery is approaching its expected service life, consider installing a new one so the car will start reliably and not leave you stranded.

Fluids: Keep your fluid levels at the manufacturer's recommended levels. This includes antifreeze, windshield washer fluid, oil and gas or diesel. Do not allow these fluid levels to get too low, as this may cause them to thicken up and in some cases, freeze.

Lights: Ensure all headlights, taillights and signal lights are working and clean. Properly working and clean lights ensure you can see and other drivers can see you.

Emergency kit preparation

An emergency can occur at any time during winter weather. Preparing for those emergencies with a survival kit is vital to employee safety. Be sure you have a kit for each vehicle in your fleet. The contents of an emergency kit can vary, but at a minimum, it should include:

1. Blankets,
2. A first-aid kit,
3. Flashlight (with working batteries),
4. Jumper cables, (also consider stocking vehicles with a portable car battery jumper),
5. Ice scraper with snow brush,
6. A shovel along with traction material (such as sand or kitty litter),

7. Bright cloth or emergency flares,
8. Fully charged phone with a charging cable and a backup battery.
9. Snacks and water.

Safe driving techniques

It's crucial to practice winter weather maneuvers on ice or snow, but always in a safe environment like an empty parking lot during daylight. This allows you to rehearse maneuvers slowly, such as steering into a skid to understand how your vehicle reacts. Driving the vehicle in icy conditions in the parking lot can also give you a better understanding of stopping distances. If your vehicle has anti-lock brakes it is better to stomp on them and if you have non-anti-lock brakes, it's better to pump them. The parking lot is a great place to practice.

When driving in wintry conditions, remember to drive cautiously. Prep for the drive by setting up your GPS or music choice while parked to avoid the temptation to do so while driving. Check weather forecasts before heading out and identify road conditions that may be hazardous. Give yourself enough time to get to your destination; do not rush. If possible, avoid driving if a severe storm is expected.

Once you leave, keep a safe driving distance from the car ahead of you to allow more time to stop. If you encounter any slippery roads, slow down to maintain control of the vehicle. Accelerate, brake and steer smoothly to avoid skidding, as abrupt actions can cause you to lose control. Avoid using cruise control, as it can make it harder to control the vehicle. If you find yourself in a skid and driving a front wheel drive vehicle, ease off the gas and steer into the direction you want to go. If you are operating a rear-wheel vehicle in a skid, maintain steady pressure on the accelerator, turn the steering wheel in the same direction the rear end is moving and correct the course once the skid has ended. Lastly, keep an eye open for black ice. Black ice is hard to see as it blends with the road. Be cautious in areas prone to it, such as bridges, overpasses and shaded areas. If you hit black ice, remain calm, and do not brake suddenly. Instead, keep the wheel straight and let the car pass over the ice.

If you find yourself stranded, it's crucial to stay calm. Your vehicle can provide warmth, so stay inside. Remember to run the engine intermittently for heat and ensure the exhaust pipe is clear of snow to prevent carbon monoxide buildup. Use your cell phone, bright cloth or emergency flares to signal for help. Staying calm in such situations can help you make rational decisions and take necessary precautions for safety.

By preparing your vehicle, adjusting your driving habits, and staying aware of changing conditions, you can significantly reduce the risks associated with winter driving. Remember to prep your vehicles for the winter weather, supply each vehicle with an emergency kit and train employee on safe driving techniques. All these practices will prepare your team for the winter. Always prioritize safety, and remember that arriving late is better than not arriving at all.

If you need help identifying potential hazards in your workplace, please contact Andy Sawan, Risk Services Specialist at Sedgwick at andrew.sawan@sedgwick.com or 330.819.4728.