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Handling Icy Roads

As temperatures drop, driving conditions become more challenging. Reaching your destination safely means maintaining control of your vehicle and remaining aware of conditions. Icy roads demand a specific driving style. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, in 2003 speeding factored into 58 percent of fatal crashes on icy roads. Knowing how to handle slick conditions can prevent you from becoming one of this year's statistics.

Vehicles handle the road differently. Before venturing out, become familiar with your car's features. Check the owner's manual for information on tire traction and braking. This is your vehicle's first line of defense.

In general, front wheel drive vehicles are better on icy roads because most of the weight lies above the drive wheels. This provides better traction. If you have a rear wheel drive vehicle, carry extra weight in your trunk, such as sand bags, to improve traction.

Your car's braking system determines how you need to respond when your car starts slipping on the road. An ABS, or anti-lock braking system, handles ice best, as locked wheels cause or worsen skidding. Simply apply steady pressure to the brake after letting your foot off the gas pedal. ABS automatically adjusts to road conditions and varies your braking pressure as needed. If your car is not equipped with ABS, gently pump the brakes to avoid locking your wheels. If the wheels lock, don't panic. Ease off the brakes, and gently reapply pressure to regain control. No matter if you have ABS or not, apply brakes before hitting ice. Braking on ice worsens or starts a skid.



Your safety when driving on ice mainly depends on your awareness. To maintain control, reduce your speed and steer gently. Sudden sharp maneuvers will cause you to skid. Shut off cruise control; it maintains a uniform speed, which is not a good feature to use when driving on ice. Always drive manually to adjust your speed to varying road conditions. Needless to say, passing on an icy road is never a good idea. Since it takes twice the distance to brake on ice, keep at least a three car distances between you and other vehicles.

The tricky thing about ice is the difficulty in knowing where it is until too late. Typically shady areas, bridges, and intersections provide the best conditions for ice to form. Black ice is often invisible to the eye. It commonly forms near bodies of water, tunnels and shady areas. If the road surface appears slick and dark black rather than gray, be cautious.



If you do end up in a skid, follow these steps to regain control:

- Look and gently steer into the skid
- Never apply brakes
- Make steering corrections if you skid back the other way
- Gradually apply gas after regaining control of the vehicle

Handling icy roads means knowing your vehicle and how to use it, driving with common sense, and remaining aware of your environment. When conditions become unpredictable and hazardous, staying safe means keeping your wits in the driver's seat.

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-- *Catie Hayes*

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