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Winter Car Safety

Driving a car is a big responsibility. Not only do you now have to realize that your actions hold the lives of fellow passengers in your hands, but you have to make sure that your vehicle is in safe running order. Your responsibilities only grow as the winter approaches. Make sure that, before winter hits in your area, you have the following items checked out in your car.

Antifreeze: This is an important one for winter, as it keeps vital fluids in your car liquid, instead of frozen, during cold winter storms. Make sure your antifreeze is fresh, and that it is filled.

Exhaust System: During the winter months, windows are closed, the air is often re-circulated, and snow or ice can shroud a car. If your exhaust system is not working properly, this could result in excess noxious fumes being put into your car's interior. Exhaust fumes are poisonous, and, in large enough quantities, fatal. If you smell gas or exhaust fumes in the interior of your car, have your mechanic check for leaks.

Heater: Checking that your heating system works well is probably the last thing you want to check during the warmer days of summer, but do it. Because it could be the one feature of your car that could save your life in the event you become stranded. If it's not working properly, get it fixed ---and fast.

Hazard Lights: Have a friend stand outside your car and check all your lights --- are your signals blinking in back and front, on the driver's side and passenger's side? What about your backup lights? Brake lights? Often, people forget to include the hazard lights in the mix, but they are especially important to make a disabled car stand out when the weather is dreary.

Oil: During the Fall, it's a great time to have your oil changed --- and it's vital for some vehicles that use different weights of oil for winter vs. summer. Make sure you make an appointment to have your winter oil change.

Brakes: Brakes are important all of the time. Your brakes are one of the parts in your car that stands between you and death, quite literally. Your brakes should never be in bad shape, and should be checked every time you rotate your tires, about every 5000 miles. But add slippery roads to the mix and making sure you have ample brake pads and fluids is more important than ever.

Defroster: The simple fact is not all defrosters are created equal. Your defroster may work well or not. Make sure your defrosting system is in its best possible shape and make allowances for its quirks.

Thermostat: You know that little gauge on your dashboard with the H and C and the little needle that goes between? Well, it's really bad if it hits the H (or the "red zone" right before it), and it's also bad if you can't get your engine warm enough to run well. Part of this is an effect of your antifreeze/coolant, but another component is your thermostat, which helps regulate your engine temperature. Cars have been known to lose engines because their thermostats have gone out. Engines often cost more than the entire car in the case of a teen's first car. Always keep an eye on your temperature gauge, and have your car checked if it's off.

Battery: One of the less expensive parts of a car is a battery, yet it can shut the entire system down if it's dead. Batteries last varying lengths; the more expensive ones last longer. When a battery is installed, the date of installation should be indicated on the top of the label. If it's not, be sure to put it on yourself when you install a new battery. Nothing is worse than being stuck in the middle of nowhere during a torrential rain or freezing snowstorm with a dead battery --- that means no heater or lights, either. Find out today when your battery was installed. If it's getting close to the end of its life, think about replacing it.

Tires: Depending upon the area of the country you live in, you may require a completely different set of tires for winter (snow tires or studded tires). Other people prefer to carry snow chains when snow isn't a months-long constant, so they don't have to be changing tires over and over. If it's time for snow tires, most people in an area talk about it, and most people know it. However, if you carry chains, just because they're in your trunk doesn't mean you'll know how to use them. Do a "dry run", putting on chains with someone who knows how, when the weather is nice. That way, when you encounter a snowstorm you'll have some confidence about putting on the chains. Some chains are easier to put on than others. They usually cost more, but can be applied without even rolling the car back and forth over the chains.

Ignition System: Does your car start right up? Or does it take forever to turn over? If it's the latter, find out why before cold mornings add even more stress to your ignition system.

Wiper System: Summer sun beating down on wiper blades often destroys them before the first rain of fall hits the ground. They harden, split, and generally don't clear water off like they should. Wipers, and the cleaning windshield fluid that goes along with them, are easy for anyone to replace. And they're available at many places other than auto supply stores. Put a new set on your next shopping list, and fluid if needed, and put on a fresh pair before the rain comes down. Also, make sure that the jets that deliver your wiper fluid are clear--- sometimes they become clogged with hardened water or dirt.

Winter Storm Bag: Every motorist should have a bag in his or her trunk that contains potentially life-saving gear. Most of this can be obtained from around the house without spending a dime --- such as a blanket for each family member, matches or lighters and towels, and some nonperishable foods, such as granola bars. Canned fruit and nuts are great as long as you keep the hand-cranked can opener with them. Some bottled water, extra socks, and gloves are useful and at hand for most people. Rain gear that fits into a small purse is available in many variety stores very reasonably, so that enough for an entire family can easily go into your supply bag. If you're the type who always brings along appropriate shoes along during a storm, then you won't have to worry about adding some collapsible rubber galoshes to the bag. You'll need a flashlight with extra batteries in case you're on a dark road and need to change a tire or put on chains at night. Some models allow you to use your cigarette lighter to get a tremendous amount of light --- but you can't take it with you if you need to walk somewhere --- so keep the traditional kind on hand as well.

If you're reliant upon medication to live, such as insulin, make sure you have at least three days' supply with you. Many people every winter become stranded overnight in the snow, so hedge your bets by keeping some extra in your winter kit.

A small sack of sand not only helps keep the back of your car heavier and adhered to the road, but can provide traction when spilled on slick surfaces as well. A folding camping shovel doesn't take up much space, but you'll be glad to have it if stuck in mud or snow.

Of course, common sense dictates that everyone should be carrying jumper cables, all year long. It may sound like a lot of

extra work, and cost some extra money, but longtime drivers know how many details go into safe motoring.

-- *Bob Stuber*