

Winter Preparedness

How to be prepared for the Worst Winter Can Throw at You, So You Can Enjoy the Fun Winter Offers

"Walking in a Winter Wonderland" What images that brings to mind! Images of snow covering the landscape, crisp fresh mountain air; the array of sports that winter brings - hockey, skiing, ice skating on the pond, a fire in the fireplace, a family outing to go sledding; winter holidays with presents under the Christmas tree and being home for the holidays.

But winter has a nasty side: freezing temperatures, frostbite, frozen water pipes, stalled cars, blizzards, freezing rain, scraping the windshield, hypothermia, wind-chill warnings, snow drifts, road closures, traffic delays, etc. I guess you get the drift of where this is heading.

Officially, WINTER starts on December 21st, the shortest day of the year. But here winter starts in November, if not earlier. Once the snow arrives, it is here to stay until March. Those of us who live in the Northeastern Oregon know all about winter. When the nasty side of winter hits you hear the jokes such as: "Here we have 9 months of winter and 3 months of poor sledding." "We have 4 Seasons - Winter, Still Winter, Almost Winter, and Construction." It is said that we prefer to drive in the winter because the snow fills in the potholes. So, to enjoy winter you have to be prepared for winter. But there are some basic rules that apply for dealing with winter to make that time of year more enjoyable.

My wife says that the best winter preparedness is to stay home, hibernate and wake up come spring. However, while that works for bears and gophers, it is not practical for most people. Being the Public Works Director I think of winter preparedness like this: get the snow plows ready with lots of spare parts, make sure all of the wings for clearing driveways are working, the crews are trained in the routine of the equipment operation, the sanders are fully operational, and there is lots of aspirin to take when the phone starts ringing. The Boy Scout motto of "Be prepared", every *time* just because you never know when you, or someone else, is going to need to deal with the winter weather.

Last year we had a major blizzard. It left people stranded on the roads; others were forced to stay overnight in stores or at their office, as the roads were closed or impassable. Most people managed fine, with stores, businesses, and schools opening their doors to give them shelter, food, or other necessities through these trying times. But there are always a few that disregard the warnings, and this last year we ended up with several people suffering unnecessarily as a result of the winter blizzards.

If you have never been in a blizzard it is frightening - the wind howls, the snow is blowing and swirling, visibility is measured in inches, you lose all sense of direction, and it is cold, bone-chilling cold. Last year we had the temperature plunge to -10 Fahrenheit and with the wind chill it was -37F. For those of you that where here that translation is it was COLD, REALLY COLD.

At those kinds of temperatures exposed skin freezes in less than one minute. Even if you are properly dressed it is too cold to venture out in the stormy weather.

While my career places me in charge of taking care of the local needs of the citizens and

merchants during the winter season, I face the fact that winter is coming again. I drag all my personal winter gear out of storage: parkas, gloves, mitts, more mitts, scarves, stocking cap, long-johns (thermal underwear), snow boots (don't forget the felt insoles), then the "good to -65 degree" boots, the fleece vest, the hand warmers, the insulated bib overalls, the thermal socks. Next, out comes all the winter stuff for the car, then the house checklist.

Car Checklist

These things need to be done to the car before winter sets in: check the cord on the engine block heater, install the battery blanket, check the antifreeze in the radiator (needs to be good to at least -45C), check tire air pressure (air contracts in cold weather, even an 8 pound drop in tire pressure will increase your gas usage by 5% and tire wear by 25%), find and install the wind cover for the front of the vehicle, and above all have the winter traction tires installed and/or devices in your vehicle. Now the stuff that goes in the car and stays there until spring arrives: Snow shovel, bag of sand or kitty litter for traction, blankets or sleeping bag, candle and water proof matches or lighter, flashlights with extra batteries or crank flashlight, high protein snacks, cell phone and cell phone charger or extra battery, list of emergency phone numbers, extra coats or blankets, snow boots, a couple of pairs of mitts/hand warmers, windshield antifreeze, booster cables, tow rope, gas line antifreeze, windshield ice scraper.

When dressing to be out in the weather you should dress in several loose layers of clothing (this traps air between the layers for insulation). Now on a practical level, when I am going into town to go to work I don't usually dress in all my winters finest, but I do dress so that I can stand to be outside for a bit, plus I have all the gear I need in the car if I should have a flat or get stranded. These things need to be done to the car before winter sets in: check the cord on the engine block heater, install the battery blanket, and check the antifreeze in the radiator.

When I know I am going to be outside working or going on a longer trip, that is a different story. I then dress to deal with the weather. I am always horrified when I am out on the highway and you meet people that think that just because their car is new and running great that they can get by with just a light winter jacket, normal shoes and dress gloves and think they can drive extremely fast. One of the realities of life is the colder it gets the more likely your car is to break down and the faster you go the harder you are going to get stuck or the worse you will get hurt. If there is a loose connection on anything electrical, or a weak part, it will pick the middle of winter, in the middle of nowhere, to break down. If anything can go wrong, it will go wrong at the most inconvenient time, in the worst possible place.

Every year the Oregon Department of Transportation provides information through radio and TV weather warnings, highway hotlines, and their websites on traffic conditions and weather/storm warnings, useful tips on winter driving, data on stopping distances, what winter storm warning terms mean and other information that you should be aware of. They also provide advanced reader board warnings of conditions ahead. Take the time to find their website and make use of them.

Weather warning terms you need to know:

Winter weather advisory: Expect winter weather conditions to cause inconvenience and

hazards.

Frost/freeze warning: Expect below-freezing temperatures.

Winter storm watch: Be alert. A storm is likely.

Winter storm warning: Take action. The storm is in or entering the area.

Blizzard warning: Seek refuge immediately! Snow and strong winds, near-zero visibility, deep snowdrifts, and life-threatening wind chill. Wind chill is one of the things that make winter so dangerous as it turns a regular cold day into an extremely cold day. Take this into consideration when you need to go out into the cold. The wind chill can zap the body temperature quickly. Each year in the United States, more than 700 people die of hypothermia (low body temperature) caused by extended exposure to cold temperatures. Not only do you need to prepare your car and yourself for winter you need to prepare your home for winter as well

House checklist

The first thing you need to do when winterizing your house is to do a complete inspection of the outside of the house, looking for cracks and holes around pipes and cables that need to be filled or caulked. Check the windows and doors for proper seal. Caulk and weather-strip doors and windows. (a 1/4 inch crack around a door is equal to an 8"x8" hole in the wall).

Install storm windows or cover windows with plastic from the inside.

Insulate any water lines that run along outer walls (water in the lines will be less likely to freeze the last thing you want is a plumbing problem on the coldest day of the year).

Drain outside water lines and store any hoses.

Find snow shovel, make sure snow blower starts and runs, or make arrangements to have sidewalk or driveway cleared by neighbor or snow Removal Company. Be a good neighbor and help clear the sidewalk or driveway of an elderly neighbor or someone that is unable to do it for health reasons.

Install an easy-to-read outdoor thermometer.

Make sure your heating system is winter-ready, have chimney and flue inspected. Top off propane or heating oil tank.

During winter storms or prolonged power outages you need to have enough provisions to last at least a week or more. If you live far from other people, have more supplies on hand: drinking water, canned/no-cook food (bread, crackers, dried fruits), non-electric can opener, baby food and formula (if baby in the household), first-aid kit, prescription drugs and other medicine, de-icing products such as kitty litter to melt ice on walkways, flashlight/camping lamp and extra batteries, candles and matches.

To provide heat when facing a power outage (if you are not using wood heat as your primary heat source already) you can use a fireplace with plenty of dry firewood or gas-log fireplace, portable space heaters or kerosene heaters (check with your local fire and/ or building departments to make sure that kerosene heaters are legal in your area) - never place a space heater on top of furniture or near water - keep heat sources at least 3 feet away from furniture and drapes. Never leave children unattended near a space heater. Never use charcoal grills or portable gas camp-stove indoors - the fumes are deadly.

Extreme cold can cause water pipes in your home to freeze and sometimes break. Check all water taps frequently when the temperatures drop extremely low. Allow more heated air near pipes by opening kitchen and/or bathroom cabinet doors under the sink. If your pipes do freeze, be careful how you thaw them. Thaw the pipes slowly with warm air from an electric hair dryer rather than using a propane torch. Keep containers of drinking water or prepackaged bottled

water on hand. Snow can be melted for a variety of uses if water supply is interrupted.

Outdoor Safety

- Dress warmly. Wear loose fitting, layered clothes. Wool is always better than cotton; some of the new synthetic fleece materials are excellent. Outer garments should be tightly woven and water-repellent.
- Wear mittens rather than gloves - mittens are warmer.
- If you shovel snow, do stretching exercises to warm-up. Take breaks often. Avoid working too hard (strains your heart).
- Cover your mouth to protect your lungs from extremely cold air.
- Drink water and other fluids to avoid dehydration.
- Watch for signs of frostbite: feeling of "pins and needles" followed by numbness. Skin may freeze hard and look white. When thawed out, skin is red and painful. Severe frostbite may cause blisters or gangrene (black, dead tissue).
- Watch for signs of hypothermia (uncontrolled shivering, slow speech, memory loss, stumbling, sleepiness, extreme tiredness). If you think you have frostbite or hypothermia, don't eat or drink anything containing caffeine or alcohol as they can worsen your symptoms.
- Drink warm liquids that do not contain caffeine or alcohol (alcoholic drinks cause your body to lose heat more quickly).
- Do not eat snow (lowers your body temperature).

While the winter care of animals is a whole series of articles on its own, a few basic things apply to all critters. When the weather is extremely cold all animals need some protection from the elements. In winter, water and food can freeze, so care needs to be taken to see that a supply of fresh water is available.

Take the time to prepare for winter so that you can enjoy all the good things that winter offers, without facing unnecessary risks from being unprepared.

And last of all remember that those public servants that may have caused you some inconveniences during this trying time of the year may have been removing snow for 12 to 14 hours straight without a break, started at 2:00 a.m., and may have missed the holidays with their families to try and make your winter travel more enjoyable so just be patient and understanding.