



Fall Car Care

Getting Ready for Winter

As the seasons change, your car and truck care needs to too. Now is the time to prepare vehicles for the rugged winter months.

Comprehensive winterizing doesn't just ensure that your car or truck is ready for the everyday challenges associated with cold weather. You're also putting the safety of your family and yourself first.

CHECK THE TIRES

Your tires need to be ready for any conditions your vehicle may face, based on the climate where you live. Some winters are defined by rain, while others see heavy snowfall. In either case, your tires will need good treading to stay gripped to the road. A simple way to gauge tread depth is the penny test: With the head side of a penny facing you, insert the body of President Abraham Lincoln into the tread. If the top of his head can be seen, your tires are in good condition. If you can see Lincoln's entire head, however, your tires need replacing.

If you live in an area that frequently experiences severe winter weather, consider switching from regular all-season tires to winter or snow tires before difficult driving conditions set in.

WINDSHIELD AND WIPERS

Inspect the windshield for any cracks or chips that may develop into larger issues, particularly in cold weather, since they can dangerously impair visibility. Hire a professional to make these repairs. Depending on your insurance coverage, their service call could be at no cost. If you deal

with heavy ice and snow, consider transitioning to a winter-grade windshield wiper fluid that resists freezing. There are specially designed wiper blades that stand up better to winter conditions.

ESSENTIAL FLUIDS

Make sure your antifreeze and coolant levels are adequate to protect the engine.

Check this during your next oil change. You may need to switch to an oil with higher viscosity for winter conditions specific to your region.

EXTRA SUPPLIES

Expand your standard, comprehensive roadside emergency kit with a winter-ready kit that includes a selection of essential items

that address this season's unique demands. This may include snow and ice removal tools, traction aids like cat litter or sand, a tire pressure gauge and cold weather survival gear. The emergency kit should contain jumper cables, a first aid kit, a flashlight, basic tools, a cell phone charger, non-perishable snacks and water.



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Time to Declutter

Busy summers can lead to the accumulation of a lot of things in our vehicles. Side pockets, trunks and glove compartments can begin to look like junk drawers.

Take advantage of the changing seasons to clear out the clutter, while making sure you have all the necessary documents and equipment in place so you're well prepared for a winter journey.

GLOVE COMPARTMENT

It can be tempting to use your vehicle's glove compartment as a temporary storage space for napkins, snacks, pens and pencils, receipts or wrappers because of its convenient location. Instead, optimize this space for more important items by tossing out unneeded items. Make sure you have all needed documents and they're up-to-date, including the car's registration and proof of insurance. They include details that need to be readily available in situations involving accidents or interactions with law enforcement.

Other helpful items can include relevant medical documentation, with information regarding allergies and any required medications for yourself, other drivers or

regular passengers. Having this handy could prove invaluable in the event of an accident where you are unable to communicate. If there's room, keep your owner's manual in the glove compartment, as well. (If not, store it away in the trunk.) This book is essential to sorting out the problem if dashboard lights are activated. The manual will explain the

appropriate steps to take. It also serves as a valuable resource for tracking your vehicle's maintenance schedule.

TRUNK

Note that many manufacturers of contemporary vehicles no longer provide a spare tire or the tools necessary for repairs. Some used vehicles have lost these key items along

the way, as well. If needed, invest in your own spare tire to ensure you are prepared for any roadside emergencies. A full-sized tire is preferable, when possible, since it does not have the speed limitations associated with smaller donuts. Keep safe extra fluids on hand, including brake fluid and pre-mixed antifreeze, in case your vehicle requires maintenance while you are

away from home.

INSIDE

Don't forget the cabin of your car or truck. Consider hiring a professional detailing service to vacuum the carpets and polish all interior surfaces. Many modern cleaning products are specially designed to help protect the interior from regular wear-and-tear as well as damage from the sun.



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Checking Your Levels

This season can be tough on car engines. That's why it's so important to have essential fluids regularly checked.

Whether you take care of vehicle maintenance yourself or have it done at a shop or dealership, six key fluids will need to be checked, replaced or topped off. They include engine oil and coolant, of course, but also brake fluid, power steering fluid, transmission fluid and windshield washer fluid. Here's what to look for:

ENGINE OIL

Allow the engine to cool before checking the oil. Locate the dipstick, remove it and wipe it clean with a cloth before reinserting it. Pull it out again to see whether the oil level reaches the indicators marked on the stick. Take note of the color, which should be yellow or amber. Oil should feel slick and not gritty.

BRAKE FLUID

Contemporary vehicles operate with hydraulic brakes that need fluid to operate. If brake fluid becomes contaminated with water, the brake lines may become rusted and leak. Lower brake fluid level can result in spongy pedals and inconsistent performance. To check the brake fluid, refer to your owner's manual for the reservoir's

location and check its level and color. Brake fluid is available in various translucent colors; it should not be dark or cloudy.

POWER STEERING FLUID

Modern steering systems operate hydraulically. Find a dipstick or reservoir under the hood near the engine and look for markings or lines. If the fluid level is below the

recommended range, add the specified type as indicated in your owner's manual. If you're regularly required to add more fluid, have a local pro look for a possible leak.

TRANSMISSION FLUID

Transmission fluid lubricates and cools the system's gears, valves and clutches. Many modern transmissions

use a version that typically doesn't require replacement. Just note that degraded transmission fluid can lead to rough shifting, engine surges and unusual noises. Some vehicles include a dipstick to check transmission fluid levels, but many newer models may require a visit to a shop or dealership. Check your owner's manual.

WINDSHIELD WASHER FLUID

This easily overlooked item is crucial for safe driving as it keeps your windshield free from obstructions. Buy some at any auto parts store or full-service gas station. Locate the reservoir marked with the windshield wiper symbol under the hood and fill it to the line.



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When It's Icy

There's an undeniable wonder at the sight of snow and ice. That is, until you're dealing with it out on the road.

When you're behind the wheel, these wintry conditions present significant challenges. Even the most seasoned drivers can be caught off guard, potentially resulting in expensive crashes, serious injuries or even death. That's why it's so important to prepare for winter and adjust your driving.

DRIVING DIFFERENTLY

Whenever possible, experts always advise people to remain at home during inclement weather – and that includes drivers with extensive experience in winter conditions. Others out on the road may not have the same level of expertise, and unexpected situations can always arise. If staying home is an option, do so to minimize risks.

For those who must venture out, begin by reducing your speed. Adjust your driving technique to accommodate the decreased traction on snow or ice. Accelerate and brake gradually to avoid skidding. Don't forget that stopping distances are significantly longer on slick surfaces as compared to dry roads. That means you'll need to modify your following

distance accordingly. Turn off cruise control, as this system doesn't compensate for challenges posed by winter conditions.

PREPARING FOR WINTER

Before inclement weather arrives, equip your vehicle with winter tires and check your antifreeze levels. Have at least one good ice scraper and

brush in the car. Be ready to attach traction devices like snow chains, if they are permitted in your area. Never leave home without cold-weather essentials, including extra clothing, hats and mittens, blankets, cell phone chargers, water and food in case you become stranded in harsh winter conditions. Keeping at least a half tank of

fuel at all times is strongly suggested.

IF YOU'RE STUCK

Tell someone your destination and planned route before leaving in bad weather. Should you get stuck, it's usually best to remain with your vehicle, since it provides shelter. You could become disoriented when walking during a storm.

Increase your visibility by attaching a brightly colored cloth to your vehicle or displaying it in the window as a signal for help. Avoid exerting yourself too much. Keep the lights on at night to alert other drivers. Be sure that your exhaust pipe is clear to prevent the dangerous accumulation of carbon monoxide inside your car or truck.



Don't Forget Your Battery

Tucked away under the hood, it's easy to forget the spark that powers crucial elements of your vehicle.

Address any issues with your battery before you find yourself on the side of the road during the colder months. Sometimes, they run down because of natural wear-and-tear. In other cases, the vehicle may have simply been out of use for too long. Here's a checklist of essential maintenance tips.

WHEN TO REPLACE IT

Vehicle batteries typically have a lifespan of three or four years, depending on several factors. They naturally lose power over time, and older batteries may require additional attention. Periodically inspect your battery and its connections, especially if you've had your vehicle for several years. Examine all cables linking the battery to the vehicle for signs of damage or corrosion. Make sure the battery cables fit securely. If corrosion is causing them to loosen, use a wire brush to clean the affected areas.

Many local auto parts stores offer complimentary testing services to evaluate your battery's charge. While you're there, replace any needed connectors, cables or other battery components. If your battery is three years old or older or



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shows signs of wear, it may be best to replace it to ensure optimal performance. Consider investing in a portable battery charger to keep in your vehicle's trunk for emergencies.

MAINTAINING A CHARGE

Batteries can lose their

charge if a vehicle is parked for an extended time. If you plan to store your vehicle during the fall and winter months, a trickle charger may be beneficial. This device connects your battery to a wall outlet, providing sufficient power to prevent charge loss. Of course, the

most cost-effective way to maintain your battery charge is to have someone drive your vehicle for approximately 15 minutes each day. This practice helps sustain the battery and keeps other components of the vehicle and engine functioning smoothly.

If daily driving support isn't an option, consider disconnecting the negative battery cable. Just remember that this approach has its drawbacks, as you will likely lose your vehicle's time and stereo settings. There may be other issues with its in-vehicle computer, as well.

Leather Seat Care

Leather seats give any vehicle a sense of style. They're also far easier to maintain than most fabric options. Leather, however, requires its own special attention.

For best results, use special cloths, cleaning solutions and conditioners. Here's how to keep your leather car surfaces in tip-top shape:

GETTING STARTED

Begin by sweeping away any loose dirt, trash or debris from your leather seats. A heavy-duty shop vacuum is great for pulling dirt from pesky corners and crevices – especially if you use the vacuum nozzle accessory. Place it right in the seams and between the seating and back surfaces for the most thorough cleaning.

CLEANER OPTIONS

Be careful when selecting a cleaning solution. Avoid household products that contain ammonia or bleach, since they can permanently damage the leather in your vehicle. Instead, opt for commercial cleaners from retail or auto parts stores that specifically mention use on leather. Some do-it-yourself types create their own solution by mixing liquid dish soap or Castile olive oil-based soap with water. The ratio is five parts

water to one part soap. When cleaning your leather seats, use a microfiber cloth and take care not to oversaturate the surfaces with too much liquid.

DRYING YOUR LEATHER

Use a second clean microfiber cloth to thoroughly dry all surfaces, and remove as much

moisture as possible. Never leave your seats and any other leather areas wet for a long time, since this can lead to mold growth and cracking or warping. Experts recommend a thorough cleaning at least once a month – or more frequently if you are often traveling with children and furry friends.

LEATHER CONDITIONING

For additional protection, evenly apply a high-quality conditioner to all leather surfaces. This will help maintain moisture levels within the leather and may provide UV protection to prevent fading. After the conditioner has been absorbed, wipe off any excess product with a clean

microfiber cloth.

Manufacturers usually recommend that leather be allowed to “rest” for four to six hours after application before driving again. Refer to instructions on the product label for the best results. Condition leather surfaces in your car or truck every three to six months.



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Storing a Vehicle

If you're planning on storing a vehicle for the winter months, now is the time to prepare.

There are several specific precautions that keep your vehicle ready to use when temperatures begin to rise again. You may have to explore your storage options.

STORAGE OPTIONS

A personal garage or enclosed vehicle-sized shed offers the best protection against harsh winter

elements. You'll want to keep rain, snow and road salts away to prevent deterioration on the outside and inside of the vehicle. If you don't have the extra space for your summer ride, look into climate-controlled units at local storage facilities. Friends may have extra room, too. The most cost-effective option is an all-weather cover for the vehicle, but there are drawbacks. Covers and tarps can help keep the vehicle clean and dry, but they are not air-tight so the elements can still get in. They may come off or sustain damage in high winds. Be prepared to replace your cover as necessary.

WINTER PREPARATIONS

Before placing your vehicle in storage, take a few precautions to keep everything in good condition throughout the colder months. Prepping includes cleaning and detailing, fluid changes, tire maintenance and fueling up.

Fill up with gas before shutting it down for the winter. A full tank helps prevent moisture accumulation in the fuel system which can lead to big problems later on. If you plan to store your car for more than 30 days, changing the engine oil can extend the life of your engine. Tires may lose pressure and develop flat spots during

prolonged storage. So, take short drives and check tire pressure monthly to prevent any issues. If your planned storage period will exceed 30 days, consider elevating the vehicle on jacks to avoid tire issues.

Detailing the vehicle on the outside helps preserve its aesthetic appeal and prevents paint damage. Cleaning under helps remove debris or contaminants that could potentially harm the engine.

If the vehicle remains uncovered, be on the lookout for potential water intrusion, bird droppings and tree sap that can damage the interior or exterior while it's not being driven.