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Preparation key to safe winter driving

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Television comic David Letterman used his “Top 10” list for laughs, but a “Top 10” list of winter driving hazards isn’t funny.

Taking steps to avoid the hazards and ensuring your vehicle is good to go for winter driving doesn’t require humor, but instead involves planning and common sense.

“Winter driving is tough on any vehicle and, just as you do when warmer weather arrives, you need to have your vehicle serviced and checked so it’s ready for the season,” said Walt Beckman, program manager, Driving Directorate, U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center. “Some items are do-it-yourself things, others need to be performed by a certified mechanic.”

To reduce the chance of mechanical issues leaving you in the cold, get your car serviced now. Visit a mechanic for a tune-up and other routine maintenance, including an inspection of all hoses and belts, and remain alert for signs of other parts needing repair or replacement.

Once you’re on the road, winter driving hazards will be waiting for you. Dr. William Van Tassel, manager of the American Automobile Association’s driver training programs, pointed to the importance of visibility, speed and healthy tires.

“Reduced visibility can be a killer, making it harder to see everything going on around your vehicle,” he explained. “Next, many drivers fail to reduce their speed, overestimating their tires’ traction. Lastly, too many drivers don’t realize it takes longer for the vehicle to respond to steering and pedal inputs.”

What can a driver do to mitigate the risks associated with these issues?

“First, see and be seen: keep your headlights on, and clear all snow from your vehicle. Second, adjust your speed down to the corresponding lower traction,” Van Tassel said. “Third, do one thing at a time: brake, then turn, then accelerate. Fourth, be smooth; drive as if you have a hot cup of coffee in your lap.”

When the temperature drops, so does a vehicle’s battery power. For gasoline-powered engines, be aware it takes more battery power to start your vehicle in the cold. Electric and hybrid vehicles experience reduced driving range. Whatever you drive, make sure your battery is up to winter challenges.

Other common-sense items to remember when planning include checking your cooling system, filling your windshield washer reservoir and checking your windshield wipers. If you can’t see where you’re

going, the best preparations don't matter. Also check that your window defrosters (front and rear) work properly.

The value of preparation pays off big time if it prevents problems on the road, said Van Tassel.

"In winter conditions, one never knows what sort of driving-related emergency could arise," he explained. "In emergency situations, even seemingly small preparations could end up saving a life. That's why it's so important to make sure your vehicle's drivetrain and tires are road ready, and to have a complement of useful items aboard such as flashlights, blankets, food, water, cellphone, shovel, traction mats and gloves. These and other items could make the difference."

For more information on winter driving safety, visit <https://safety.army.mil>.