

READY ...OR NOT?



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What's in your trunk?

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Travel, no matter the time of the year, has a common denominator: preparation. You wouldn't leave on a summer vacation without first checking your vehicle and you shouldn't travel, even a short distance, during winter without being prepared.

When a major winter storm slammed the South in January 2014, Atlanta traffic was virtually paralyzed when a combination of sleet and snow rendered all roadways hazardous and, in many cases, impassable. Georgia and five other southeastern states were declared to be in a state of emergency following hundreds of accidents that led to fatalities and injuries.

Thousands of motorists who found themselves stranded realized what they did — or didn't — have in their trunks suddenly became very important.

"Everyone should know what's in their trunk when they get on the road during winter," said Walt Beckman, program manager, Driving Directorate, U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center. "Not just for long road trips, but short ones, too, such as driving to work. You don't need to travel far to encounter trouble from winter driving conditions."

Winter driving statistics provide the cold facts on why it's important to be prepared.

"According to the National Weather Service, 70 percent of fatalities related to ice and snow happen in automobiles, and staying warm and well hydrated are the most important things to consider if you're stranded in your car," Beckman explained. "To help avoid finding yourself in that situation, use the technology available today to check the weather before getting on the road."

Technology such as radios that receive over-the-air current, local weather conditions and forecasts, along with cellphones to access online weather data, add a new dimension to travel safety. Your phone allows you to contact someone should you need assistance and affordable GPS units identify your location, if needed. But these devices are only as good as their batteries, so make sure they're charged before you hit the road. Adapters for using your vehicle's power to operate them are also a wise investment.

"Tell someone when you're expected to be at your destination and what route you're traveling," Beckman added. "That way, if you fail to show up and no one has heard from you, they'll know where to begin searching."

While technology is valuable for any travel, don't forget the basics.

"Stock your vehicle with essentials you might need in the event of an emergency," said David Friedman, deputy administrator, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. "They'll prove useful if you become stranded."

The website www.ready.gov lists jumper cables, flashlights and extra batteries, first aid supplies, food items such as energy bars, nuts and canned fruit and a can opener as must-have items for vehicle winter emergency kits.

Water for each person and pet in the vehicle is important, along with a battery-powered or hand-cranked radio. Other smart ideas include cat litter that can be used to gain traction on slippery road conditions and a shovel and ice scraper.

You may think a jacket is all you need to stay warm, but a blanket, gloves, hat and sleeping bag are also a good idea. These items will keep you warm should you find yourself in your vehicle for an extended time.

Besides emergency supplies, it's always smart to start your journey with a full tank of gas and keep it at least half full. Should you become stranded, be safe and stay in your car, activate your flashers, call for help and wait for it to arrive.

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