

# Staying Safe During Winter Storms and Extreme Cold

Winter weather can be dangerous and volatile. In fact, according to the National Weather Service, winter storms are considered deceptive killers because most deaths are indirectly related to the storm. Thus, it is important to be prepared during and after a winter storm or extreme cold.

## During a Winter Storm

Winter storms can last for a prolonged period of time. Do the following during a winter storm or extreme cold:

- Stay indoors during the storm.
- Walk carefully on snowy, icy walkways.
- Avoid overexertion when shoveling snow. Overexertion can bring on a heart attack—a major cause of death in the winter. If shoveling snow is unavoidable, stretch before going outside.
- Keep dry. Change wet clothing frequently to prevent a loss of body heat and possible frostbite. Wet clothing loses all of its insulating value and transmits heat rapidly.
- Watch for signs of frostbite. These include loss of feeling and white or pale appearance in extremities such as fingers, toes, ear lobes and the tip of the nose. If symptoms are detected, get medical help immediately.
- Watch for signs of hypothermia. If symptoms of hypothermia are detected, get the victim to a warm location, remove wet clothing, warm the center of the body first and give warm, non-alcoholic beverages if the victim is conscious. Get medical help as soon as possible. These include uncontrollable shivering, memory loss, disorientation, incoherence, slurred speech, drowsiness, and apparent exhaustion.
- Drive only if it is absolutely necessary. If driving is unavoidable: travel in the day; do not travel alone; keep others informed of your schedule; stay on main roads and avoid back road shortcuts.
- Let someone know the destination, route and expected arrival time. If your car gets stuck along the way, help can be sent along the predetermined route.
- If the pipes freeze, remove any insulation or layers of newspapers and wrap pipes in rags. Completely open all faucets and pour hot water over the pipes, starting where they were most exposed to the cold (or where the cold was most likely to penetrate).
- Maintain ventilation when using kerosene heaters to avoid build-up of toxic fumes. Refuel kerosene heaters outside and keep them at least three feet from flammable objects.
- Conserve fuel, if necessary, by keeping the residence cooler than normal. Temporarily close off heat to some rooms.
- If you will be going away during cold weather, leave the heat on in the home, but set it to a temperature no lower than 55°F.

## Dress for the Weather

If you must go outside, wear several layers of loose-fitting, lightweight, warm clothing rather than one layer of heavy clothing. The outer garments should be tightly woven and water repellent.

- Wear mittens, which are warmer than gloves.
- Wear a hat to prevent loss of body heat.
- Cover the mouth with a scarf to protect the lungs.

## Stranded in a Vehicle

If a blizzard traps you in a car:

- Pull off the highway. Turn on hazard lights and hang a distress flag from the radio antenna or window.
- Remain in the vehicle where rescuers are most likely to find you. Do not set out on foot unless a building is visible and near where shelter can be taken. Be careful; distances are distorted by blowing snow. A building may seem close, but be too far to walk to in deep snow.
- Keep the engine off, but start the car and run the engine and heater about 10 minutes each hour to keep warm. Whenever the engine is running, open a downwind window slightly for ventilation and periodically clear snow from the exhaust pipe. This will protect from possible carbon monoxide poisoning.
- Exercise to maintain body heat, but avoid overexertion. In extreme cold, use road maps, seat covers, and floor mats for insulation. Huddle with passengers and use coats for a blanket.
- Take turns sleeping. One person should be awake at all times to look for rescue crews.
- Eat regularly and drink ample fluids to avoid dehydration, but avoid caffeine and alcohol.
- Be careful not to waste battery power. Balance electrical energy needs the use of lights, heat, and radio with supply.
- Turn on the inside dome light at night so work crews or rescuers can see you.
- If stranded in a remote area, stomp large block letters in an open area spelling out HELP or SOS and line with rocks or tree limbs to attract the attention of rescue personnel who may be surveying the area by airplane.
- Leave the car and proceed on foot, if necessary, once the blizzard passes.

## After Winter Storms and Extreme Cold

- Go to a designated public shelter if the home loses power or heat during periods of extreme cold. Text SHELTER + your ZIP code to 43362 (4FEMA) to find the nearest shelter in the area (example: shelter 12345). Before going to the shelter, be sure to check with the local emergency management agency for availability and other information.
- Continue to protect yourself from frostbite and hypothermia by wearing warm, loose-fitting, lightweight clothing in several layers. Stay indoors, if possible.

## Resources

- American Red Cross: [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)
- Federal Emergency Management Agency: <http://www.ready.gov/winter-weather>
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration: [www.noaa.gov](http://www.noaa.gov)
- National Traffic and Road Closure Information: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/trafficinfo/index.htm>

*Some content on this page was gathered from documents found on the website for the Federal Emergency Management Agency: [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov)*

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