

Wintertime Health and Safety

Winter is a wonderful time of the year – except for winter driving, endless snow shovelling, winter sport injuries, chapped and dry skin, colds and flus... Is the thought of black ice and white snow giving you the blues? It needn't be. Being prepared can make winter an enjoyable and safe time of the year. Here's how...

Winter skin care

Year-round sun protection

While seasons change, one thing remains constant: the sun. No matter what season it is, it's still shining, and you still need sunscreen to protect your skin against harmful ultraviolet rays. Wear makeup or a moisturizer with sun protection factor (SPF) 15 on your face and all exposed areas of skin throughout the winter to help protect your skin against the sun's damaging rays. If you participate in winter sports, apply sunscreen with a high SPF. The sunlight-reflecting quality of snow can leave you with a severe sunburn from a day on the slopes. Sunscreen is especially important if you are using a tretinoin-containing product, such as Retin-A or Renova, as it makes you more prone to sunburn. And don't forget your lips. Make sure you wear lip balm or lipstick with sunscreen.

Can't get enough moisture?

Coming in from the cold and can't wait to take a long, hot shower to warm up? Not so fast! While hot showers can warm you up, they can have a drying effect on your skin, as they tend to deplete natural oils from your skin, leaving it warm yet dry. Stick to short, warm showers instead. Pat dry, and while your skin is still slightly damp, apply a moisturizer. For those super-dry areas such as hands, elbows, knees, and heels of your feet, use an extra-strength moisturizer formulated especially for dry skin. Take special care if you have sensitive skin. Exfoliating scrubs and products that contain alpha-hydroxy acids may worsen already dry and irritated skin. If you suffer from severely dry skin, eczema, or "winter itch," ask your pharmacist for a urea-based cream or see your doctor about possible treatment options. And, to help keep your skin from drying out, consider a humidifier to maintain adequate indoor air humidity.

Following these tips throughout the winter months can help keep your skin from the chapping, cracking, and irritation that harsh winter weather, dry air, and wind can cause.

Let it snow...

Sing along while you let it snow, let it snow, let it snow – but you know that eventually you'll have to reach for that shovel and start digging out. But this, too, can be fun as long as you keep a few things in mind when shovelling.

Keep warm to avoid hypothermia, which comes from your body's inability to produce more heat than it is losing when exposed to the cold, dropping its internal temperature below 35°C. Always wear a hat, gloves or mitts, and waterproof boots when shovelling. And cover your face, especially if you have blood pressure problems.

Would you know how to recognize and treat hypothermia and frostbite?

- The early warning signs of **hypothermia** are shivering and slurred speech, usually followed by confusion or lack of coordination. Increase your body temperature by getting out of the cold if you can as soon as possible. Knowing what can cause hypothermia is your best defence against it. The main culprits are windy, wet, and cold conditions. Cold, windy air chills the body, while wetness absorbs the body heat. Always wear a hat, gloves or mitts, and waterproof boots when shovelling to protect yourself against hypothermia.
- When skin becomes numb and looks white and waxy, you know you have **frostbite.** Touch the skin. Is it firm to the touch but soft underneath? This means that your skin has lost heat. So act fast to avoid more heat loss. Use the heat of your hands to re-warm the frozen skin by gently placing your hands on the area. Be careful – tiny ice particles in the frozen skin can damage the tissue if you rub it, so don't! And if your skin turns grayish-blue and becomes hard to the touch, try to warm up and see a doctor immediately.

  Remember, if your skin is not covered, it will quickly freeze if exposed to temperatures below -25°C. When it's that cold outside, there is an increased risk of hypothermia and frostbite. If you don't have to go out, stay indoors. But if staying in is not an option, bundle up!

Don't over-exert yourself.

- **Pace yourself,** especially if you have a heart condition, high blood pressure, or back problems. Avoid doing all your shovelling at once. By shovelling frequently, and by preventing the snow from piling up, you can avoid staying out in the cold for prolonged periods, overexerting yourself, and lifting heavy snow.
- Before going out in the cold, **warm up** by doing back- and side-bending exercises, and make sure you drink water before and after shovelling.
- **Lift smart!** To avoid injuring your back, try not to lift a shovel full of snow. Instead, using a lightweight, pusher-type shovel, bend your knees, and hold the shovel close to you as you push the snow to the side. This will also help reduce twisting or turning movements that could hurt your back.
- **Give yourself a break!** Rest if you get tired. And if you are experiencing chest or back pain, put the shovel down. Heart attacks have been known to occur when heavy lifting was performed in cold weather.

If health concerns keep you from using a snow shovel, you might consider using a snow blower. It's easier to use.

Don't get stuck in the snow

Dread winter driving? Being prepared is the key. But would you know what to do if you got stranded or found yourself driving through heavy snow? Follow this advice – and download our Winter Driving Safety Checklist to print out and make sure you're prepared.

A winter car tune-up can help reduce your worries about winter driving. Take it to a garage for a tune-up and inspection to help prevent problems. Make sure that your brakes work well to prevent skidding. Cooling and electrical systems must be in good working condition. Put fresh anti-freeze in, and make sure that all electrical connections are clean and tight, especially if your car's battery is getting old. Remember, cold weather is hard on batteries.

If you want your car to start every time, make sure your engine is checked for faulty wiring, worn spark plugs, a sticking choke, or emission control devices that need attention.

Don't neglect the exhaust system. To avoid carbon monoxide leaks when the windows are closed, check the muffler and tail pipe system. Heaters, defrosters, and wipers should be in good working condition to keep your windshield clean for good visibility of the road and traffic around you. Make sure oil and filters are clean!

To increase traction in soft snow, consider investing in good snow tires. And check your tire pressure regularly. Keep in mind that for every 5°C of temperature drop, tire pressure drops one pound. In some provinces, such as Quebec, snow tires are mandatory for the winter and violation of this law could result in a fine.

Don't forget to keep a full gas tank at all times, as it will help reduce condensation and prevent the gas line from freezing. So fuel up!

What's in the trunk? You should have winter equipment to keep you weather-ready:

- windshield scraper and snow brush
- shovel
- sand or kitty litter (in a bag, of course!)
- wire traction mat or other abrasive material
- box of facial tissues
- spare tire
- wheel wrench and jack
- first aid kit
- flashlight
- battery jumper cables
- road flares

And, if you have a long trip ahead, make sure you check the weather forecast and road conditions, and don't forget to pack:

- a warm blanket
- candles and a lighter or matches
- non-perishable food
- warm clothing (e.g., winter boots, hat)

Remember to exercise extra caution when driving in the winter.

- Buckle up, stay alert, and pay attention to the unsafe actions of other drivers and poor driving conditions.
- Make sure that the snow and ice is cleared from your car.
- Slow down and allow more travel time.
- Leave a greater distance between you and the car ahead of you, as an icy road requires double the stopping distance of a dry road.
- Be in control of the steering wheel at all times and avoid using cruise control.
- To make your car more visible to other drivers, use your low-beam headlights. They are brighter than daytime running lights, and having them on activates the taillights.
- Know what to do when road conditions are icy. Remember, you can't see black ice! If you start skidding, stay calm, steer in the direction where you want your car to go, don't touch the brakes, and don't accelerate. To disconnect the driving force on the drive wheels, shift to neutral if you have an automatic transmission or put your foot on the clutch if you're using a manual transmission.
- If you get stranded in the car during a snowstorm, get off the road, put your emergency flashers on to make sure you are visible, and stay in your car until help arrives or the storm subsides. Check the exhaust pipe to make sure that the snow is not blocking it. To avoid carbon monoxide poisoning, leave a window slightly open.

Print out our Winter Driving Safety Checklist and use it to make sure you're well prepared for the winter roads.

Rough sledding?

Every year, emergency departments treat children injured in sliding accidents. When minor bruises and bumps give way to broken bones and serious injuries of the head and spinal cord, it's a sign that parents and children should be reminded of safety while playing outside.

There are several precautions you can take that can help protect your child against injuries. The safest tobogganing hills have no trees, fences, rocks, wires, or other objects that may pose a risk of injury. A young child should always be under the watchful eye of a parent or adult. A Canadian Standards Association (CSA)-approved hockey helmet, with a warm hat under it, is recommended for children under 12 years of age. It is dangerous to wear long scarves while sliding, as they can increase the risk of choking. Always make sure that your child's toboggan or sled is in good condition. Remember, certain positions on a sled are better than others at minimizing the risk of injury:

- Kneeling provides the most protection.
- Lying on the stomach increases the risk of head injury.
- Lying flat on the back increases the risk for spine injury.

Teach your child:

- to be aware of his or her surroundings
- to watch out for other sliders
- to avoid sliding down the hill in the direction of a road, parking lot, river, or pond
- to walk to the side and away from the sliding path when walking up the hill
- to go indoors when their clothing is wet and they feel cold to avoid hypothermia and frostb.

Knowing how to help prevent injuries can make for a fun and enjoyable winter for your child.

All material copyright MediResource Inc. 1996 – 2022. Terms and conditions of use. The contents herein are for informational purposes only. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.

Begin Chat