

This Winter, Don't Get Your Car Stuck Before It Gets Started

by Mark Salem, NASCAR
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(NAPSA)—NASCAR drivers have it easy; they only race in warm weather. Regular folks like you and me don't have that luxury. We often have to get our vehicles started in very cold temperatures, and we don't have pit crews to help us out if things go wrong.

So, it's that much more important for the rest of us that we keep our vehicles in peak condition as winter's cold weather approaches. By taking a few basic precautions, you'll be far less likely to find yourself on the side of the road waiting for a tow truck to arrive.

Battery

Keep an eye on your battery. A battery's cranking power is reduced significantly in freezing weather. Older batteries are notorious for fooling drivers by working just fine in warmer weather, then failing as soon as the weather turns cold. If yours is at least four years old, have it tested by your mechanic. When in doubt, replace it. And just to be safe, carry a set of quality jumper cables at all times in the vehicle. You may also want to consider buying a portable power pack, which can be used in emergency starts.

Motor Oil

Give some thought to the kind of motor oil you have in your engine. During winter, you need an oil that can handle low temperatures and quickly flow to critical engine parts on those cold mornings. I'd recommend a fully synthetic oil such as Mobil 1 for the winter months; it's designed to flow well even in lower temperatures and is an excellent oil overall. (For more information about Mobil 1, go to www.mobiloil.com.)



Filters, Coolant and Hoses

Make sure your three main filters—oil, gas and air—are in good condition. Check your coolant level and the thermostat, as these elements make sure that your engine warms up properly. Coolant should be changed every two years; extended-life coolants last about five years. Also, be sure to test your heater and defroster, since you can't drive if you can't see through your windshield. Finally, check for leaking or soft hoses and have them replaced if need be.

Tire Pressure

Remember, air contracts in cold weather, and the air in your tires is no exception. Your tire pressure will go down as the weather cools, so make sure your tires are inflated properly. Too little pressure will increase wear and increase your fuel consumption; too much pressure can reduce traction, especially in icy conditions. The proper air pressure listings are often found on the side of the driver's door, or in the glove box. (Don't just look at the psi rating listed on the tire itself; that is the maximum psi, not necessarily the recommended pressure.) Make sure you also inspect your treads and replace any tires that are looking worn.

Vehicle Warm-up

When starting a vehicle in cold

weather, be sure to allow the engine to idle for a few seconds before driving off. Why? Because doing so will ensure proper oil flow and lubrication. That said, don't allow the engine to idle for a prolonged period after start-up in cold weather. All this does is waste fuel. It doesn't do anything to warm drive-train components. After starting your car and allowing it to idle for a short time, just drive easily for several miles to ensure proper vehicle warm-up.

Icy Windows and Locks

Make sure you keep an ice scraper in your car, and check your windshield wipers and defrosters (front and rear) to verify that they're working properly. Devices for door locks are also useful, but heated keys are a bit better when locks are frozen.

Stock the Trunk

It's always smart to be prepared, so make sure you keep a few useful items in your trunk—a small shovel to help dig out of snow is a good start. I also recommend keeping a bag of sand in the trunk. It not only gives added traction with its weight, but you also can sprinkle it on snow or ice to improve your traction. Finally, throw an extra blanket, hat and gloves in the trunk, just in case.

Winter's coming—so be your own pit crew chief and make sure your car is ready. Follow these simple steps, and you'll have a much better season out on the road.

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