

12 Winter Driving Tips for the Beltline & Madison Roads

When the snow flies in Madison and across Wisconsin, the roads get slick fast. Even if you're comfortable driving in winter, it only takes one patch of ice or one hard brake to send your car sliding.

These simple winter driving tips will help you stay in control and get where you're going safely.

1. Slow Down More Than You Think You Need To

Your tires have far less grip on snow and ice. The faster you're going, the harder it is to steer, stop, or correct a slide. In winter, drive like every light, stop sign, or turn is going to sneak up on you.

- Leave earlier so you're not rushing.
- Stay under the speed limit when roads are slick.
- Gently ease off the gas well before intersections.

2. Leave a Lot More Following Distance

On dry roads, the "3-second rule" is OK. On snow and ice, that's not enough. You may need **double or triple** that space so you can respond without slamming the brakes.

- Pick a sign or landmark and count "one-thousand-one..." as the car ahead passes it.
- If you catch up too quickly, back off until you have a comfortable cushion.
- Extra space gives you time to brake gently instead of suddenly.

3. Avoid Heavy Braking to Keep the Car Balanced

One of the biggest winter driving mistakes is **slamming on the brakes**. Hard braking throws the weight of the car forward and can upset its balance, especially on slick roads. That's when you lose traction and start sliding.

- Look far ahead so you can brake **early and gently**.
- Use smooth, steady pressure on the pedal instead of jabbing at it.
- Let off the gas and let the car slow on its own as much as possible before you brake.
- Keep enough space in front of you so you only need to brake when it's truly necessary, not every few seconds.

The goal is to keep the car settled and balanced so all four tires can do their job.

4. Steer, Brake, and Accelerate Smoothly

Every sudden move your car makes (quick steering, a hard stab of the gas, or a sharp brake) uses up the small amount of grip your tires have on snow and ice. Instead... go smoothly.

- Turn the steering wheel gradually, not in jerks.
- Ease into the gas instead of flooring it from a stop.
- If you feel the tires start to slip, gently back off the gas or brake to let them regain traction.

5. Use Winter Tires If You Can

All-season tires are okay for light winter weather, but true winter tires are made for cold, snow, and ice. They stay softer in low temperatures and have tread designed to bite into snow.

- If your budget allows, invest in a set of winter tires for the cold months.
- Check tire pressure regularly. Pressure drops in cold weather.
- Worn tires + ice = long stopping distances, even with good driving habits.

6. Watch for Black Ice and Trouble Spots

Black ice is nearly invisible and often shows up when the pavement just looks “wet.” Be extra cautious in spots that freeze first:

- Bridges and overpasses
- Shaded areas that don’t get much sun
- Intersections where packed snow turns glossy and slick

If you suspect black ice, keep the steering wheel straight, avoid sudden braking, and gently ease off the gas.

7. Give Yourself Extra Time for Everything

Winter driving takes longer... period. Trying to drive “summer fast” on winter roads is how fender benders and ditch trips happen.

- Plan an extra 10–20 minutes for your commute when it’s snowy.
- Take a calmer route if it’s less busy or has fewer hills.
- Mentally decide you’re OK being a few minutes late if it means arriving safely.

8. Clear Off Your Entire Car, Not Just a Peephole

Driving with a tiny cleared spot on your windshield is dangerous for you and everyone around you. Snow and ice left on your car can fly off and hit cars behind you.

- Clear all windows, mirrors, and headlights.
- Brush snow off the roof, hood, and trunk.

- Make sure your wipers aren't frozen to the glass before turning them on.

9. Use Your Lights and See & Be Seen (BIG ONE!)

Winter days are darker, and snow can cut visibility dramatically. Turn on your headlights, even if it's not snowing. There's more salt and dirt on our windows now.

- Turn on your headlights whenever it's snowing, raining, or gloomy.
- Use low beams in snow and fog. High beams can make it harder to see.
- Wipe road salt off your headlights and taillights when you stop.

Also, it's amazing to me how many people don't have their lights on at night anyway (with Daytime Running Lights and a lit of dashboard maybe they forget... I don't know), but in the winter it's more important to have your light on. There's less daylight, too. Turn 'em on. Most cars have an automatic lights feature... just use that at the least.

10. Pack a Simple Winter Emergency Kit

Even a short drive across Madison can turn into a wait if there's a crash, a spin-out, or a stalled car ahead. A basic kit can make that a lot less stressful.

Here are some suggested items to include:

- Warm gloves, hat, and blanket
- Ice scraper and small shovel
- Sand, kitty litter, or traction mats
- Phone charger and a small flashlight
- Some water and snacks

11. Practice in an Empty Lot

If you're not sure how your car behaves in snow, find an open, empty parking lot after a snowfall and practice at low speed.

- Feel how the car brakes on snow versus ice.
- Practice gentle steering and see how quickly it responds.
- Try stopping from a low speed so you understand how long it takes.

That small investment of time can pay off the first time you hit a slick patch in real traffic.

12. Stay Calm If You Start to Slide

Even with perfect driving, winter will still surprise you sometimes. If you start to slide:

- **Don't panic and don't slam the brakes.**
- Gently ease off the gas.
- Look and steer where you want the car to go.
- Make small, smooth corrections instead of big ones.

Most slides feel worse than they are. Staying calm and keeping your inputs gentle gives your tires the best chance to grab again.

Drive Smart and Share the Road

Winter driving in Madison is all about respect. That means respecting the weather, the road conditions, and everyone else on the road. Slow down, leave room, avoid heavy braking that upsets the balance of the car, and keep your inputs smooth. If you do that, you'll be in much better shape when the next storm rolls through.

Stay safe out there this winter and support the local businesses that help keep your car ready for the cold months.

Winter Driving FAQs

How much extra space should I leave in winter?

A good rule of thumb is to at least double your normal following distance, and in heavy snow or icy conditions, triple it. If you feel like you're constantly tapping the brakes, you're probably too close.

Is it bad to use cruise control on snowy or icy roads?

Yes. Avoid cruise control in winter conditions. You want full control over acceleration and deceleration so you can react smoothly to changing traction.

Do I really need winter tires in Madison?

While you can get by on all-season tires, winter tires offer better grip, shorter stopping distances, and more control in snow and ice. If you drive often during storms or on side streets that aren't cleared right away, they're worth serious consideration.

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