

GIVE YOUR CAR A WINTER WORKOUT WITH THE RMI

The onset of winter can be bad news for motorists. Little light, bad weather and worse roads conspire to make driving tiring, unpleasant, and sometimes even dangerous.

The Retail Motor Industry Federation (RMI) is the trade body that represents motor sector businesses in the UK that provide sales and services to motorists. The RMI sees every journey as an opportunity to prevent the worst from happening, and there is a great deal of preventative action that you can undertake yourself.

Before setting off:

- Make sure that the car has enough fuel.
- Let someone know your intended movements.
- Listen to traffic news and weather forecasts, and wear warm clothing.

Naturally, the need for seasonal preparation also extends to the various systems that run the car, so make sure that the antifreeze in the car is fresh. Insufficient or 'old' anti-freeze can cause hose, water pump or other major units to fail leading to overheating. Anti-freeze should be changed every two years due to the deterioration of the corrosion inhibitors, or according to manufacturer recommendations.

Other things to do include:

- Make sure battery is in good condition.
- On cold mornings use a de-icer on windows, or a scraper – NEVER hot water.
- Check that the screen wash is not clogged and that the bottle is topped up for use, and make sure that an additive is used to stop it freezing.
- Check windscreen wipers for wear and replace them if necessary.
- Make sure that all heaters and ventilation systems are working so that misting is minimised – do not switch off your air-conditioning as this keeps moisture and condensation to a minimum.
- Give all external lights and mirrors a thorough clean.
- Headlamps should be correctly aligned.
- Tyre tread depth should be at least 1.6 mm across the central three-quarters of the breadth of the tread and around the entire circumference, and there should be no cuts or cracks.
- Spray a special carborundum powder lock lubricant into the door locks to prevent seizing up. Never use a damp inhibitor on a modern lock.

Once the car is ready for winter, you should make sure it is carrying emergency equipment so that if the worst happens, you are ready too.

Useful supplies could include:

- Torch, spare batteries and bulbs.
- Screen scraper / de-icer.
- Warning triangle.
- First-aid kit.
- 'Hands free' mobile phone / phone card / cash.
- Blankets and warm jacket / robust shoes (in case of breakdown).
- Shovel (to clear snow if necessary).
- Fire extinguisher.
- Rope (for towing if necessary).

- Road atlas, maps etc.

Before you set off, you need to make sure that the light settings match the driving conditions. As the winter months go on, drivers will find themselves using their lights more and more, but the use of the lights will need to be appropriate for the road conditions. If conditions change during a journey, alter your light settings accordingly. For example if you use front and rear fog lights unnecessarily you will be breaking the law. It is an offence to apply them on a clear night, when they could dazzle other road users. If you set out and conditions improve during your journey, remember to switch to normal lights

Separate from the issue of lights, fog is still one of the most potent impediments to safe driving. Other culprits include rain, ice, sleet, and snow. All of these elements can lead to dangerous driving conditions, but cannot cause accidents without the assistance of one vital catalyst, usually provided by the driver: speed.

In the winter, speed can be your enemy, so winter driving means steady driving. Stopping distances double in the rain and these extend even further with worn tyres, when roads are icy they can increase ten times. You should always keep well back from the vehicle in front, but in the winter you should be even further back.

On treacherous roads, even if yours is the only car for miles, you should drive as slowly as possible in the lowest practical gear. Apart from checking your speed, you also need to consider the way you handle the car as a whole. Steering, gears, clutch, and accelerator should all be used more gently than at other times of year.

Essentially, safety in the winter comes down to four things:

- Check your car.
- Be prepared for anything.
- Be cautious.
- Monitor your speed.

If you try to follow these rules you should find yourself on the road to safe winter driving. To make sure your car is ready for the road in the first place, book your car in for a service. Careful preparation by the motorist can only go so far.

There are many elements within a car that will need the kind of professional attention that only a garage can provide. A service performed by an RMI member garage should help make a car ready for the more unfriendly weather conditions of the winter.

To find a reliable garage, motorists should look to the RMI.

A member will be able to advise you on the type of service you need, and will be able to point out potential problem areas before they arise, or become serious. In fact, whether you want to buy or sell a new or used car or motorcycle, service or repair your existing vehicle, find an auction house, or a cherished number plate dealer, the RMI will be able to help you.

If you have a complaint against an RMI member garage, the RMI's National Conciliation Service should be able to help you get redress, if the problem cannot be solved in direct consultation with that member.

To find a garage that is a member of the RMI, visit www.rmif.co.uk and use the 'Find a Service' function. You will also find details of RMI members that sell new and used cars or motorcycles, provide vehicle servicing and repair, and sell petrol.

Motorists can also use the RMI website to find all RMI members mentioned above, and in addition vehicle auctioneers and cherished number plate dealers.

With careful driving and proper preparation, drivers can travel safely through the winter.