

# SNOW AND BLIZZARD HAZARDS



The average annual snowfall for the Omaha area is about 26 inches, but it can vary from year to year. The record for the most snowfall was 74.2 inches in 1983, and the record minimum was 8.3 in 1954.

Recent winters have also produced a variety of challenges. An October snow storm in 1997 dropped about 12 inches of snow and ice into the area in less than 14 hours. Many of the trees still had leaves and were destroyed. Some areas were without power for several days because the roads were impassible and crews could not get out to clear trees from lines and restore power. This particular storm did present a catastrophic event and was declared a federal disaster. In the winter of 2004, weekly snows caused so much accumulation that people were running out of places to put the snow. In 2004, a storm arrived with 14 inches of snow in 48 hours, but no other snowfall was received in that month. So as you can see, the amount of snow in our area varies greatly, but you should always be prepared for the worst case.

Snowfall alone, doesn't usually present a catastrophic disaster; however, if combined with ice or high winds, it can become a major issue in the form of blizzards. Heavy, short-term snowfall can have an impact on many things. The following information will help prepare you for winter weather in Nebraska.

## Winter Storm Alert System

### Winter Storm Watch

If a winter storm is possible in your area, a winter storm WATCH will be issued. Tune in to NOAA Weather Radio, commercial radio, or television for more information.

### **Winter Storm Warning**

If a winter storm is occurring or will soon occur in your area, a winter storm WARNING will be issued and you should take precautions when traveling or venturing outdoors.

### **Blizzard Warning**

This warning is issued when sustained winds or frequent gusts of 35 miles per hour or greater are expected along with considerable amounts of falling or blowing snow that will result in reduced visibility of less than a quarter mile. Typically, a warning is issued if these conditions are expected to prevail for a period of three hours or longer.

## **Winter Driving**

The leading cause of death during winter storms is transportation accidents. If it is your first experience in driving on snow covered or icy roads, you should learn how your vehicle handles differently before heading out on the highway. If you must go out, keep a windshield scraper and small broom in the car, keep at minimum of a half-tank of gas, verify road conditions in other areas before departing on any trip, always travel during daylight when possible, dress warmly in layers, and carry a small supply of water and high energy snacks. Here are some additional tips to make your winter travels safer:

- Beware of icy spots, especially on bridges and in sheltered areas. Drive at reduced speeds and allow distance to react to traffic. Slow down gradually when approaching curves and stops.
- Turn off cruise control in wet or snowy weather!
- Keep your headlights on, particularly during inclement weather. Make sure your headlights, taillights and windows are clean so you can see and be seen.
- Motorists may use studded snow tires in Nebraska from November 1 to April 1. School buses, emergency vehicles and mail carrier vehicles may use them anytime during the year.
- Check often for current weather reports through local media sources before you travel.
- Keep the radio on. Weather conditions change rapidly and so do the road conditions.
- For 24-hour-a-day, year-round Nebraska traveler information, motorists can dial 511 on their cell phone or landline. "511" provides motorists the most current information about weather conditions, road conditions and travel advisories. The 511 system and various other weather links are available at [www.transportation.nebraska.gov](http://www.transportation.nebraska.gov) or [www.511nebraska.org](http://www.511nebraska.org).
- If outside Nebraska, motorists can dial 800-906-9069 for traveler information.
- Make sure everyone in a motor vehicle wears a seat belt and children are in a car safety seat.
- When traveling outside of a business or residential district, it is unlawful to follow a highway maintenance vehicle (snowplow, truck or grader) more closely than 100 feet

when it is plowing snow, spreading salt or sand, or displaying a flashing amber or blue light. If conditions permit, however, drivers may pass a maintenance vehicle.

- Snowplows cause soft snow to swirl. It can become difficult to see the plow and for the plow operator to see you. Turn on your headlights and windshield wipers for additional visibility.
- Plowing snow on a multi-lane roadway is often done in tandem (more than one snowplow at a time). Give them plenty of room. Do not pass on the right side and always stay where the operator can see you.

You can also contact the 55th Wing Safety Office at 294-6357 for additional tips on winter safety in Nebraska.

## **Winter Survival Tips**

### **If Trapped in Your Vehicle During a Blizzard**

- **STAY IN THE VEHICLE!** Do not leave the car to search for assistance unless help is visible within 100 yards. You may become lost or disoriented in blowing and drifting snow.
- Use newspapers, maps and even the car mats for added insulation.
- If you have a cell phone, call someone and tell them as much as possible about your location.
- Display a trouble sign. Raise the car hood and place a bright colored item on the antenna.
- Watch for signs of hypothermia and frostbite.
- Do light exercises to keep your circulation up. Clap hands, move arms and legs, flex muscles. Try not to stay in one position too long.
- Take turns sleeping if there is more than one person in the car.
- Huddle together for warmth.
- Avoid over-exertion. Shoveling snow or pushing a disabled vehicle may put strain on the heart and increase the risk of heart attack.
- Occasionally run the Engine to keep warm.
- Turn on the vehicle's engine for about 10 minutes each hour. Run the heater and keep the interior light on whenever the engine is running. Beware of carbon monoxide poisoning - keep the exhaust pipe clear of snow and open a window slightly whenever the vehicle is running.

### **When Caught in a Winter Storm**

- Outside with shelter:
  - Try to stay dry
  - Cover all exposed body parts

- Outside without shelter:
  - Prepare a lean-to, wind-break or snow cave for wind protection
  - Build a fire for heat and to attract attention
  - Place rocks around the fire to absorb and reflect heat
  - Do NOT eat snow. It lowers your body temperature. Melt it first.
  
- At Home or in a building:
  - Stay inside
  - Make sure heat sources are operated safely
  - Maintain ventilation for heaters
  - Eat to maintain energy levels
  - Drink water to prevent dehydration
  - Wear layers of comfortable, warm clothing. Remove layers to avoid overheating, perspiration and resulting chills
  
- If you do not have heat:
  - Close off all unnecessary rooms/reduce the living area
  - Use towels to block cracks under doors
  - Cover windows with plastic or blankets

## **Vehicle Preparation**

Make sure your vehicle is in good mechanical condition. Items that you or your mechanic should check are:

Battery

Exhaust system

Heater

Antifreeze

Wiper blades and washer fluid

Ignition System

Brakes

Defroster

Oil levels

Thermostat

Tires (Consider studded snow tires)

Lights (Don't forget hazard lights!)