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Poor driving conditions forecast for many – take it easy out there

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Photo courtesy of North Dorset Police, used here to help avoid accidents...

Kim Henson encourages caution if you have to drive...

With snow, ice and very poor driving conditions forecast for many parts of Britain over the next 24 hours or so, caution is urged.

Slippery surfaces can be very difficult to drive on, even when taking care, and over the last few days there have already been many collisions. Although modern vehicles are fitted with a variety of safety aids, these are not infallible when traction/grip is near-zero, and the laws of physics tend to take preference over – for example – traction control systems and anti-lock brakes (helpful though these can be of course).

Here are a few tips that I hope may help you keep moving and avoid problems...

1. IS YOUR JOURNEY REALLY NECESSARY?

Before venturing out on icy/snowy roads, it's worth asking yourself whether your journey in your vehicle is essential? If you can postpone the trip for a day or two, it could save you time, hassle and possibly damage to your car.

2. IF YOU HAVE TO DRIVE, BE PREPARED

If you must travel, it's worth ensuring that your vehicle has a full tank of fuel, also that in the car or van you have with you a fully charged mobile phone (and a lead to enable it to be recharged from the vehicle's 12 volt socket), plus a flask containing a hot drink, something to eat (if you do get delayed), suitable warm clothing and boots (in case you do have to walk), and a small shovel. 'Grip mats' can be purchased to place beneath spinning wheels; alternatively floor mats from the vehicle could be used in an emergency. In the past I have found that lengths of stout cord, wrapped tightly around the driving wheels (and avoiding the brake hoses and calipers, also other nearby components!), can enable short-term



progress to be made on inclines where all else fails. Purpose-designed snow chains are better still but need to be removed for driving on tarmac. If possible carry a bag of sand or grit with you to sprinkle beneath the driving wheels.

3. SEE AND BE SEEN!

Don't drive off with obscured windows; clean away all snow and ice before you drive, and carry with you de-icer spray and a proper scraper in case you have to stop and clear the screens during your journey. Before you set off, double-check that all your vehicle's lights and your screenwipers are operational; clean ice from lights as well as the screens. Remember too that the wiper blades may need to be carefully lifted/parted from an icy screen, BEFORE operating the wipers; or else the blades and the wiper drive system may be damaged.

4. ALLOW EXTRA TIME FOR YOUR JOURNEY

Don't rush a journey in bad weather. Braking and steering operations require greater care and longer distances than in normal conditions. Keep your distance from the vehicle in front and on slippery surfaces operate the accelerator, steering and brakes with a VERY delicate touch; rapid movements may encourage sliding and/or wheel spinning which will, at the very least, hinder progress. Use as high a gear as possible, in conjunction with the lowest possible engine speed, when starting off, to discourage wheelspin. If the wheels do spin, ease off the power and they may get a grip...

5. BRAKE CAREFULLY

Harsh braking is unhelpful, and may result in the car sliding off the road or into another vehicle, etc. Anti-lock brake systems alternately apply and release the brakes so that the pressure is released just before the wheels actually lock, thereby bringing the vehicle to a halt as fast as possible without skidding. If your vehicle does not have anti-lock brakes, you can replicate such operation by carefully and alternately applying and releasing the brakes yourself, so that the wheels don't actually lock (if they lock the car will slide).



6. USE MAIN ROADS WHERE POSSIBLE

Major roads have a greater chance of being treated with grit/salt to provide traction and grip, so if you do need to get somewhere it is probably best to stick to main roads if possible, rather than venturing onto more minor routes which may be much more slippery or even impassable.

CONCLUSIONS

This week, North Dorset police advised motorists: “Please drive carefully. The rural roads in North Dorset are extremely icy and treacherous”. The same warning applies to any roads covered with snow and/or ice, anywhere, so the message is, “Please take care”.