

WINTER STORMS

INTRODUCTION

A winter storm can range from a moderate snow over a few hours to blizzard conditions with blinding wind-driven snow that lasts for several days. Many winter storms are accompanied by low temperatures and heavy or blowing snow, which can severely reduce visibility.

Some winter storms may be large enough to affect several states, while others may affect only a single community.

Winter storms are defined differently in various parts of the country. You should check with your local emergency management office, the National Weather Service (NWS) office, or local chapter of the American Red Cross for terms and definitions specific to your area.

WINTER STORM RISK

Winter storms are considered deceptive killers because most deaths are indirectly related to the storm.

Risks to human life caused by winter storms.

- Automobile or other transportation accidents: This is the leading cause of death during winter storms.
- Exhaustion and heart attacks: Caused by overexertion, these are the two most likely causes of winter storm-related deaths.
- Hypothermia and frostbite: Elderly people account for the largest percentage of hypothermia victims. Many older Americans literally freeze to death in their own homes after being exposed to dangerously cold indoor temperatures.
- House fires: These occur more frequently in the winter because of the lack of proper safety precautions when using alternate heating sources (unattended fires, disposal of ashes too soon, improperly placed space heaters, etc.). Fire during winter storms presents a great danger because water supplies may freeze, and it may be difficult for firefighting equipment to get to the fire.
- Asphyxiation: In an effort to get warm, people asphyxiate because of improper use of fuels such as charcoal briquettes, which produce carbon monoxide.

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WINTER STORMS

ELEMENTS OF WINTER STORMS

The elements of winter storms include:

- Heavy snow
- Ice – perhaps the greatest danger of all!
- Winter flooding
- Cold

HEAVY SNOW

Heavy snow can:

- Immobilize regions and paralyze cities.
- Strand commuters.
- Close airports.
- Disrupt emergency and medical services.

Accumulations of snow can cause roofs to collapse and knock down trees and power lines. Homes and farms may be isolated for days, and unprotected livestock may be lost. The cost of removing snow and repairing damage, and the resulting loss of business can have severe economic impacts on cities and towns.

In the mountains, heavy snow can lead to masses of tumbling snow called avalanches. More than 80 percent of midwinter avalanches are triggered by a rapid accumulation of snow, and 90 percent of those occur within 24 hours of snowfall.

An avalanche may reach a mass of a million tons and travel at speeds of up to 200 miles per hour (mph).

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WINTER STORMS

TYPES OF SNOW

Different kinds of snowfall:

- Blizzards are accompanied by winds of 35 mph or more with snow and blowing snow, reducing visibility to less than one-quarter mile for at least 3 hours.
- Blowing snow is wind-driven snow that reduces visibility. Blowing snow may be falling snow and/or snow on the ground that is picked up by the wind.
- Snow squalls are brief, intense snow showers accompanied by strong, gusty winds. Accumulation may be significant.
- Snow showers are a short duration of moderate snowfall. Some accumulation is possible.

ICE

Heavy accumulations of ice can disrupt communications and power for days while utility companies repair extensive damage. Even small accumulations of ice can be extremely dangerous to motorists and pedestrians. Bridges and overpasses are particularly dangerous because they freeze before other surfaces.

Different kinds of ice:

- Sleet: Raindrops that freeze into ice pellets before reaching the ground are called sleet. Sleet usually bounces when hitting a surface and does not stick to objects. Sleet, however, can accumulate like snow and cause a hazard to motorists.
- Freezing rain: Rain that falls onto surfaces with temperatures below freezing—causing it to freeze to those surfaces is called freezing rain. Even small accumulations of ice can cause a significant hazard.
- Ice storm: Ice storms occur when freezing rain falls and freezes immediately on impact. Communications and power can be disrupted for days.

WINTER FLOODING

Winter storms can generate flooding, resulting in significant damage and loss of life.

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WINTER STORMS

Winter flooding includes:

- Coastal floods: Winds generated from intense winter storms can cause widespread tidal flooding and severe beach erosion along coastal areas.
- Ice jams: Long cold spells can cause rivers and lakes to freeze. A rise in the water level or a thaw breaks the ice into large chunks that become jammed at manmade and natural obstructions. An ice jam can act as a dam, resulting in severe flooding.
- Snowmelt: A sudden thaw of a heavy snow pack that often leads to flooding.

COLD

Exposure to cold can cause frostbite or hypothermia and become life threatening. Infants and the elderly are the most susceptible.

What constitutes extreme cold varies in different parts of the country:

- In the south, near-freezing temperatures are considered extreme cold. Vegetation may be damaged and pipes may freeze and burst.
- In the north, extreme temperatures are well below zero.

When talking about cold, you should consider:

- Wind chill: Wind chill is not the actual temperature, but rather how wind and cold feel on exposed skin. As the wind increases, heat is carried away from the body at a faster rate, driving down the body's temperature.
- Frostbite: Frostbite is damage to body tissue caused by extreme cold and resulting in a loss of feeling and a white or pale appearance in extremities, such as fingers, toes, ear lobes, or the tip of the nose. Frostbite victims require immediate medical treatment. If you must wait for help, slowly rewarm the affected areas. If signs of hypothermia appear, however, warm the body core before the extremities.
- Hypothermia: Hypothermia occurs when the body temperature drops below 95 degrees Fahrenheit. Hypothermia can kill. For those who survive, there are likely to be lasting kidney, liver, and pancreas problems. If you suspect hypothermia, take the victim's temperature. If it is below 95 degrees Fahrenheit, seek medical care immediately! If medical care is not available, warm the person slowly, starting with the body core. Warming the arms and legs first drives cold blood toward the heart and can lead to heart failure. Dress the person in dry clothing and wrap him or her in a warm blanket, covering the head and neck. Do not provide alcohol, drugs, coffee, or any hot beverage or food. Warm broth is the first food to offer.

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WINTER STORMS

Warning signs of hypothermia include:

- Uncontrollable shivering
- Memory loss
- Disorientation
- Incoherence
- Slurred speech
- Drowsiness
- Apparent exhaustion

The National Weather Service (NWS) Storm Prediction Center issues watches and warnings of hazardous weather, including winter storms.

- A watch is issued when winter storm conditions are possible within the next 36-48 hours. Citizens should prepare for hazardous weather at this time.
- A winter weather advisory is issued when a low pressure system produces a combination of winter weather that presents a hazard, but not enough to warrant a winter storm warning.
- A warning is issued when life-threatening severe winter conditions have begun or will begin within 24 hours. Citizens should put their preparations into action at this time.
- A blizzard warning means sustained winds or frequent gusts of 35 miles per hour or greater and considerable falling or blowing snow (reducing visibility to less than a quarter mile) are expected to last for a period of 3 hours or longer.

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WINTER STORMS

WINTER STORM PREPAREDNESS

Key steps in winter storm preparedness:

- Understand the risk. Take time to learn about the winter storm risk in your area. Realize the seriousness of such storms; they may leave you on your own for a long period of time.
- Prepare your home with insulation, caulking, and weatherstripping. Learn how to keep pipes from freezing and how to thaw frozen pipes. Store sufficient fuel (or emergency heating equipment). Install and test smoke alarms on all levels of your home. Contact your local utility company about conducting an energy audit. Most will perform a basic audit free of charge.
- Service snow removal equipment before the winter storm season. Maintain the equipment in good working order, and ensure that you have an adequate supply of gas. Clearing snow can be dangerous; use caution!
- Keep your car's gas tank full for emergency use and to keep the fuel line from freezing.
- Pay attention to warnings. Use a NOAA Weather Radio with a tone-alert feature or listen to local radio or television for Emergency Alert System (EAS) broadcasts.

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WINTER STORMS

During a winter storm:

- Stay indoors and dress warmly. Wear layers of loose-fitting, lightweight, warm clothing. When necessary, remove layers to avoid perspiration and subsequent chill.
- Eat and drink regularly. Food provides the body with energy for producing its own heat. Drink liquids such as warm broth or juices to prevent dehydration. Avoid caffeine and alcohol. Caffeine, a stimulant, accelerates the symptoms of hypothermia. Alcohol is a depressant and hastens the effects of cold on the body. Alcohol also slows circulation and can make you less aware of the effects of cold. Both caffeine and alcohol can cause dehydration.
- Conserve fuel. Great demand may be placed on electric, gas, and other fuel distribution systems (fuel oil, propane, etc.). Suppliers may not be able to replenish depleted supplies during severe weather. Lower the thermostat to 65 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and 55 degrees at night. Close off unused rooms, stuff towels or rag in cracks under doors, and cover windows at night.
- If outside, protect yourself from hazards. Dress warmly, keep dry, and watch for signs of hypothermia and frostbite. Avoid overexertion. Walk carefully on snowy, icy sidewalks, and use public transportation, if possible.

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WINTER STORMS

WINTER TRAVEL

DO NOT travel if advised against it or if not necessary.

You should also take measures to protect yourself if you must drive during a winter storm:

- Winterize your car before the winter storm season. Have a mechanic check your car's systems and install good winter tires with adequate tread. Keep snow and ice removal equipment in the car.
- Keep a cell phone or two-way radio with you when traveling in winter weather. Make sure that the batteries are charged.
- Keep a disaster supplies kit in the trunk of each car used by household members.
- Plan long trips carefully and notify someone of your destination, route, and expected time of arrival.
- If you get stuck, stay with the vehicle, display a trouble sign, and occasionally run the engine to keep warm, keeping the exhaust pipe clear of snow and a downwind window open slightly for ventilation. Use available material, such as newspapers, maps, and removable car mats for added insulation. Avoid overexertion, drink fluids, and watch for signs of frostbite and hypothermia. Venturing away from your vehicle can be very disorientating in a severe storm!

Check the forecast when venturing outside. Major winter storms are often followed by even colder temperatures.

Keep children indoors during the most severe part of the storm. If allowed to play outdoors during the storm, be sure to check on them frequently.