CRISIS24 HORIZON

Advice Sheet - Personal Safety during Winter Storms

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Categories: Environment

Introduction

A winter storm is a storm with significant snow, sleet, and/or ice accumulations. The impact of a winter storm can be severe and can last from several hours to a few days. In addition to heavy snow, ice, high winds, and extreme cold, winter storms can cause flooding, storm surges, road closures, and power outages.

Common Winter Weather Events

- **Freezing Rain:** Rain that falls on subfreezing surfaces, coating roads, walkways, trees, and power lines with ice
- **Sleet:** Rain that freezes into ice pellets before reaching the ground
- **Blizzard:** A winter storm with sustained wind speeds of 35 mph (56 kph) or greater, blowing snow, and reduced visibility to a quarter mile (400 meters) or less; conditions must occur for a period of three hours or longer
- **Nor'easter:** A strong winter storm that produces winds from the northeast along the Atlantic Coast of North America; often produce significant winter precipitation and coastal impacts
- **Snow Squall:** A sudden burst of moderate to heavy snow that reduces visibility to near-zero. Typically brief and localized, but often very disruptive to motorists.

What to Do during a Winter Storm

- Seek updated weather and emergency information from local media (radio and television).
- Ensure proper nutrition by eating regularly. Drink fluids to avoid dehydration, especially if you must leave your house during the storm.
- Keep indoors if possible. Dress properly for winter weather. Use multiple layers of loose-fitting, warm clothing. Wear mittens or gloves, a scarf, and a hat - most body heat escapes through the top of the head. Ensure your face is covered. Wear shoes that have good traction.

- Monitor for signs of frostbite, including the loss of feeling and color in fingers, toes, earlobes, and nose. If the signs are present, relocate to a warm room, soak in warm water or use body heat to warm up. Heating pads or massages should be avoided.

- Monitor for signs of hypothermia, including uncontrollable shivering, disorientation, memory loss, incoherent slurred speech, drowsiness, and exhaustion. If signs are present, relocate to a warm room. Keep dry and warm the core of the body first - chest, neck, head and groin. Wrap warm blankets around yourself, including the head and neck.

- Avoid overexertion to reduce the risk of heart attacks, especially when clearing snow or walking in the snow.

- Avoid using gas-powered generators inside your home, as fumes produced by gas-powered generators can lead to carbon monoxide poisoning. Alternatives for heating during a winter storm include a kerosene-fueled heater or a wood-burning stove, if the area is adequately ventilated.

Driving in Winter Storm Conditions

A majority of winter weather-related deaths occur in automobiles. Consider using public transportation if available and if travel is necessary. If possible, limit driving to daylight hours, and avoid driving alone. Inform others of your departure time and estimated arrival time. Use major arterial roadways that are more likely to be treated. Secondary and rural routes could be impassable for several days.

Other winter driving suggestions include the following:

- Prepare your vehicle for winter driving by using snow tires or tires with studs or chains. Always keep the gas tank full.

- Carry a supply kit in your vehicle that includes a shovel/scraper, flashlight, batteries, water /snacks, additional clothing, blankets, flares, and a battery-powered radio.

- If you become stranded in your car, do not leave the vehicle. Turn on your hazard lights, call for help on your cellphone, and stay with the car until authorities arrive. Leaving the vehicle increases the risk of being exposed to frostbite/hypothermia or being hit by other vehicles. Only leave the car if you are within sight of a building where you can seek shelter and get help.

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