

Know what to do in a winter road emergency?

By Tara Marion

Driving conditions vary from season to season, but winter driving presents a number of problems that can quickly lead to emergency situations.

Most accidents occur when motorists are a) following too closely or b) driving too fast, according to both Jim Rink, of AAA Michigan in Dearborn, and Trooper Jim Campbell, accident reconstructionist, Michigan State Police Department, in Paw Paw.

By driving with some extra care in the winter and using common sense, motorists can avoid most mishaps that might befall them on slick or slushy roads.

Still, there can be times when careful driving may not be enough and split-second decision making will be called for.

Fortunately, Rink and Campbell are familiar with these driving emergency situations and offer suggestions as to how to best handle them:

- **Whiteouts.** If you're caught in a whiteout and cannot see, do not drive any further. If you can find the shoulder of the road, pull over. Stay in your car because it offers protection against the elements.

To increase your visibility to other drivers, turn on as many lights as possible and lift the hood.

While your parked vehicle does run a risk of being hit by another driver unable to see in blowing snow, Campbell said he has seen the alternative choice where motorists have left their vehicles and tried to walk to safety, only to get hit themselves while their parked car was unharmed.

If you find yourself in this situation, you will have to weigh the consequences and make your own decision as to whether to stay with or leave your car.

- **Backward sliding on a hill.** If you find your car starting to slide backward on a hill, pump your standard breaks to slow yourself down, but do not slam on them and lose your ability to steer. But if you have anti-lock brakes, push them down as hard as you can. The most important thing to remember is to keep steering. If possible, aim your car toward an open field or a grassy area to avoid a collision.

"The thing you don't want to do—avoid at all costs—is going down and running a stop sign or traffic light," said Campbell, who added that he would rather steer into a ditch than slide through an intersection.

If the driver in front of you is the one who starts to slide backward, attempt to steer your car around it to avoid colliding. If there is a car behind you, pull off to the side of the road. Unfortunately, the shoulder may have high snow banks, but Rink said this is still the most logical choice.

Never put the car in reverse because it will cause problems for the motorist behind you. "Anytime you start to back up on a roadway, it's a really bad idea," Campbell said.

- **Downed wires.** If you see downed wires during an ice storm, do not go near them. "Don't even think about it," Rink said.

Stay where you are, and call 911 if you have a cellular phone. If you don't see the wires until you are already on top of them, still stay in the car. The rubber tires will insulate you from the electricity. It is when motorists leave their cars that they get electrocuted Campbell said.

- Flat tire. If you get a flat tire in the wintertime, motorists should call a wrecker. Having a flat tire during the wintertime is a dangerous situation, especially if the flat tire is on the left side of the vehicle, exposed to roadway vehicles that could spin or slide out of control.

If you're in an accident

If you're involved in any of the above situations and cause an accident, "make sure you're out of harm's way of any other vehicles, and pull off to the shoulder of the road if necessary," Campbell said. Check to see if anyone is injured and notify the police by calling 911. Campbell said a lot of people think they can just exchange information and take off, but they really need to have a police report made."

If you witness an accident

For motorists who witness an accident, stay at the scene. Pull your car into a parking lot or off to the shoulder of the road. Again, check to see if anyone is injured, and call 911. Let the operator if the accident is an injury accident or a property accident.

After having contacted the police, administer first aid to victims who need it. Although it is preferable to have some first-aid training or certification, you should do whatever you are comfortable with.

"As long as you render some type of first aid in good faith, the Good Samaritan law usually covers you for any problems." Campbell explained. If somebody who is more qualified comes along, however, you should turn the immediate care over to that person.

Emergency kit to carry

In preparation for any situation, Rink and Campbell urge motorists to carry an emergency roadside-hazard kit with the following items: blanket; flashlight; flares or reflective triangles; battery jumper cables; first-aid supplies; basic tools; battery operated radio; kitty litter; shovel; pieces of wood to give additional traction; an antenna flag or a "Call Police" window sign and a cellular phone — which should not be used and talked on while driving on the road.