

Don't Panic! 11 Tips for Driving on Black Ice

By Jeremy Jacobs September 12, 2019

Black Ice Driving Tips

- **Do not drive.** If you don't have to, don't go out. After living in an area where black ice is common; you can tell what kind of weather black ice will form in. It is a learned skill to acquire. For a new driver or a driver who is just moving to an area where there is the possibility for black ice, it will take some time to develop this skill. But if it is not important, the trip to the grocery store can wait. However, if you must go out...
- **Drive slowly.** This should seem obvious, but it is not, to a lot of people. Slow down so you can gauge the cars and road ahead of you. Also, if you do hit black ice, it will give you time to slow down.
- **Pay attention to the outside temperature.** Most cars come with a thermometer that tells the outside temperature. They serve more than being able to make a post on Instagram about how hot or cold it is outside (guilty). You can use them as a gauge of if there is a possibility of black ice forming. It is recommended that anything below 40 degrees F, you should drive a little more cautiously. Why 40 degrees, when the road surface freezes at 32? Simply to allow for error in temperature readings, apparently, not all thermometers are made equal.
- **Do not use cruise control.** When you have the possibility of ice forming you want to maintain as much control as possible of your car. Cruise control takes some of that control away from you. Being able to slow down is a key component to driving safe and getting off the ice safely. If you are driving with the cruise control on, you take that ability away.
- **Be extra alert at dawn and dusk.** Morning and evening are prime times for black ice to form. The sun is not as effective at warming up the road surface at these times. So, there is a greater possibility of black ice forming during these times of the day.
- **Do not think you are all set because you have studded snow tires.** I had several sets of studded snow tires and they made all the difference driving in the snow. However, they still require a little traction to work. If you are sliding on ice, this means you have no traction, and your studded tires will not work.
- **Wear polarized sunglasses.** While polarized glasses are not good for driving at night; they may be okay for distinguishing black ice patches on the road. This tip comes from a commentator, and I cannot verify it. But they claim that the polarized glasses enhance the contrast between patches of black ice and regular pavement.

- **Mind your driving surface.** Bridges and overpasses are prime areas for black ice to form. If there is potential for ice to form, be extra cautious on these areas. Also, look out for shady spots on the road, the sun does not warm these areas up as quickly as the rest of the road. Any place where water can run over the road surface, at the bottom of a hill, backed up catch basin, an area of snow runoff, are potential areas for black ice to form.
- **Know your vehicle.** A vehicle with ABS (anti-lock braking system) will pump the brakes rapidly if it feels you are losing control. This can be very unnerving to people if they have never experienced this before. If you must apply the brakes and your car is equipped with ABS, keep steady pressure on the brake pedal and allow the car to do its thing until you regain traction.
- **Do not count on traction control.** This is a safety feature that transfers power from slipping wheels to non-slipping wheels. If you are on ice all of your wheels are slipping and traction control will not work.
- **Practice driving on icy surfaces.** I only recommend this if you can do it safely. I am thinking of an empty parking lot. This is the most difficult tip to replicate, as you need to have just the right conditions. But if you can find someplace safe to practice driving on ice, you will find the experience invaluable.

What to do if you Hit Black Ice

REMAIN CALM

This is the most important thing. If you start freaking out, you are going to make mistakes.

DO NOT HIT THE BRAKES.

Hitting the brakes will send your car into a skid and you will lose total control, don't do it. Rather, let your foot off the gas, allow your car to come to a stop naturally. Since you are not driving fast anyway, it should not take long for your car to come to a stop.

DON'T JERK THE STEERING WHEEL.

You need to keep the steering wheel as straight as possible. This will keep your car from going into a skid. Remember, black ice is often patchy, you need to maintain control long enough to get to an area where you can get more traction.

Turn into a skid, not in the opposite direction. Turning in the opposite direction will increase your chances of going into a spin-out.

GET OFF THE ROAD AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

Do not pull off to the side of the road. But if you see a rest area or a dinner, or anyplace you can sit tight for a little bit. Most likely the conditions will pass, and you can get back on the road again.

What is black ice?

Black ice is a thin sheet of ice that forms on the road surface. Black ice is something of a misnomer as it is not actually black but clear with very few air bubbles, so it takes on the color of the road. The fact that black ice is so difficult to see is what makes it so dangerous. It is not like snow or slush or thicker layers of ice it is transparent and takes on the color of the pavement underneath of it.

Where are the most likely spots for black Ice to form?

Typically, black Ice forms on bridges and overpasses because the cold air passes underneath the bridges and overpasses and allows the road surface to cool quicker. Also, shady spots on the road where the sun does not reach are typically cooler, so black ice has the potential to form in these areas as well.

How does black ice form?

As I mentioned black ice forms typically on bridges and overpasses and in shady spots in the road but how does it form? **The black ice forms most often when it is raining, and the temperature is at or near 32 degrees Fahrenheit at the ground surface.**

The precipitation freezes upon impact because the ground is so cold, thereby causing the black ice. In addition to this, dew and fog in the air can also cause black ice if the temperature is cold enough. Also, runoff from melting snow or rain and then a dip in temperature can cause black ice to form.

How do you spot black ice when you are driving?

A little common sense goes a long way here. If it is cold enough outside for the possibility of black ice to form; then before you get in the car look at the road.

If the road appears to be dry, but you see darker spots that are ‘satiny’ and may have a little shine to them, that is probably black ice.

And if it is on the road in one place, it is more than likely on other areas of the road, so be on the lookout.

There are several signs to look out for when you are driving.

- If you are driving during the day, mind the shady spots. As mentioned, the sun does not heat the road surface up as quickly (obviously) in the shady areas, so if you see a darker spot in the road, treat it like its black ice and avoid it.
- One last trick to spot black ice when you are driving. Keep an eye on the cars in front of you, for two reasons.
 1. One, if you see them start slip-sliding across the road, slow down, there is probably ice up ahead.
 2. And two, if you see water spray coming out from underneath their tires then you know that the ground was not cold enough to make ice. If there is no spray, then there is the potential for ice on the pavement. Just keep an eye out and drive cautiously and you should be able to spot and avoid black ice.

Do Snow Chains Work on Ice?

The short answer is no. Snow chains work best in deep snow conditions and do not really help with traction on icy surfaces. This is not to say they do not serve a purpose, but you really must consider your geographic location and what you will be driving in.

Final Thoughts...

If you live in area that is prone to having black ice form, learn the conditions, learn when black ice is likely to form and be careful. The safest thing to do is obviously avoid the roads if temperatures are prime for black ice forming. But if you must drive, exercise extreme caution. Know your vehicle and learn to spot possible danger areas and **DRIVE SLOW**.