

# Dealing with a Florida Winter Weather Event<sup>1</sup>

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People in Florida might not consider planning and preparing for winter weather events because of its normally mild temperatures. However, some northern Florida regions experience temperatures below freezing and occasional snow and ice storms during the winter months. These storm events can be dangerous and even deadly. In the past, Floridians have died because they were not prepared for cold temperatures, snow, and icy conditions. Many Florida homes also lack adequate heating and insulation for dealing with sub-freezing conditions. Loss of heating systems because of power loss can create dangerous situations for family members during winter weather events. There is also a risk of electrical outages and frozen or broken water pipes. Traveling may not be safe with ice or debris on local roadways as well.

These simple safety reminders can help you and your family be better prepared for Florida's winter weather events.

## Quick Facts

- Florida winter weather events are fairly rare; however, they can and did occur as recently as January 2014.
- In February 2010, some parts of northern Okaloosa County reported 4–6 inches of snow.
- During the winter of 1989–1990, 26 Floridians died of hypothermia.
- Along Florida's coast, snowfall is even rarer (Pensacola recorded 3 inches of snowfall in 1895).

## Actions to Take When a Winter Weather Event is Approaching

1. Ensure that adequate coats, gloves, and hats are available for all family members.
2. Replenish battery supplies and flashlights in case of a power outage.
3. Charge your cell phone(s).
4. If you or someone you know requires oxygen or is electrically dependent, develop and have a plan.
5. Ensure you have a week's supply of needed prescription medications on hand.
6. Have a week's supply of non-perishable food, with a manual can opener, and water on hand.
7. Have extra cash on hand.
8. Fill your car's gas tank.
9. Fill your bathtub(s) with water.
10. Turn your refrigerator and freezer to their coldest settings.
11. Wrap exposed exterior pipes with rubber insulation.

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12. Spread rock salt or cinders on your exterior walkways and driveways.
13. Lift your windshield wipers up, so they do not freeze to the windshield.
14. Cover the windshield and rear window with a sheet or blanket to prevent ice buildup.



Figure 1. In case of a winter weather event, be sure to have extra batteries, water, canned goods, flashlights, and medical supplies in stock.

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## Guidelines to Adhere to During a Winter Weather Event

1. Allow a small stream of water to run from faucets to reduce the risk of frozen pipes.
2. If you lose power, unplug all appliances. This reduces the initial demand on the power system when service is restored, and leave one light switched on, so you know when the power has been restored.
3. Operate generators safely:
  - Never operate one inside the home or garage.
  - Operate one only outdoors in an open and well-ventilated area.
  - Do not connect the generator to your home's wiring to avoid "back feed" into utility lines; this can injure or kill persons working to restore power.
  - Plug appliances directly into the generator.
4. Never burn an open fire indoors unless it is in a properly ventilated fireplace.

5. Never burn a charcoal fire indoors.
6. Open refrigerator and freezer doors as infrequently as possible to maintain cold temperatures, and plan ahead of time what you need to remove when the door is open.
7. Fill plastic containers with cold water and place inside the appliance to help keep the air cool inside the refrigerator and slow down food spoilage; this also increases your emergency water supply.
8. Do not hesitate to seek shelter at a locally designated safe spot (e.g., public school). Contact your county's Emergency Management Office for locations.

## Guidelines to Adhere to After a Winter Weather Event

1. Avoid all downed electric lines, and if you must touch electrically charged items, do so with a wood board.
2. Remove all wet clothing, and apply dry clothing as soon as possible.
3. Call appropriate point of contact and notify that person of your safety.
4. Attempt to create a single-lane walkway by either shoveling snow or spreading rock salt over the ice.
5. Attempt to remove snow/ice from your driveway. If you must drive, then:
  - Take extra precautions when traversing overpasses and bridges.
  - Straighten the front wheels of the car if it begins to skid or slide out of control.
  - Note that pumping the brakes should no longer be necessary if the car is equipped with ABS.
6. Attempt to replenish your supply of food and water, if conditions permit.
7. If you experienced any sleet or hail, then contact your home insurer about getting a roof damage inspection.

## Why You Should Prepare Carefully for a Florida Winter Weather Event

Even if proper precautions are taken in preparation for a winter weather event, you may find yourself having to drive in treacherous conditions if roads are not properly treated.

There is always a possibility that you may become stranded at some point during a storm. Being stranded can be frightening, but it does not have to be fatal. Knowing and understanding how to conserve fuel, while staying warm enough is critical for survival. Understanding that you may need to venture away from your vehicle is a difficult reality that could present itself. Proper protection from the elements can make the difference in whether you experience frostbite and hypothermia. To protect yourself and your family, NOAA's National Weather Service recommends carrying a winter survival kit if there is the slightest chance that you might encounter a winter weather event, which contains but is not limited to the following:

- A [First Aid Kit](#) and necessary medication in case you are away from home for a prolonged time (this should be in your car year round)
- Blankets or sleeping bags
- Spare winter clothes, such as mittens, coats, socks, and hats
- Plastic bags for sanitation
- Canned fruit, nuts, and other high-energy foods (include a manual can opener)
- Bottled water for each person and pet in your car
- Jumper cables
- Flashlight and extra batteries (cold weather drains batteries faster)
- AM/FM radio to listen to traffic reports and emergency messages
- Cat litter or sand for better tire traction
- Shovel
- Ice scraper with brush
- Flares or reflective triangle
- Brightly colored cloth (ideally red) to tie to the antenna or hang out a window
- Properly inflated spare tire and/or air compressor

## In Summary, Make Sure All Family Members Know the Five Cold Weather Preparedness Ps

1. **Protect People:** As previously stated, dress in layers and wear gloves and a hat. Stay out of the wind. Stay dry. Be sure to check on young children and the elderly who are most sensitive to cold weather.

2. **Protect Pets:** Often, we forget about our pets. If cold weather is in the forecast, consider bringing pets that normally stay outside into your home, or make sure they have a warm shelter.
3. **Protect Pipes:** Inspect your outside pipes. Cover exposed pipes and have outside faucets drip slowly to reduce the risk of breaking pipes.
4. **Protect Plants:** Many plants in Florida can only tolerate cold temperatures for a short period. Know your cold plants, and cover the sensitive plants from the cold with old sheets or burlap secured with clothespins (avoid using plastic).
5. **Practice Fire Safety:** Only use safe heating sources inside. If you use space heaters, then make sure to follow instructions. Also, be attentive to any open flames inside the home.

## Final Thoughts

If you are anticipating a winter weather event, do not wait to take action. Grocery stores' shelves quickly become depleted because of overly concerned citizens who stock up on all the items they can in case the storm lasts longer than anticipated. The same applies to gas stations and their fuels pumps. Staying indoors and off the roads is a safe way to endure a storm, but adequate preparation for becoming stranded may save your life. Winter weather events can be enjoyable and perhaps beautiful, but they also can catch you off guard if you do not know what to anticipate. Plan ahead to be prepared!

## References

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## Keywords

Ice, snow, disaster preparation, safety