

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Winter driving tips from a longtime driver's education teacher
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CATHY WURZER: Drive slow-- good advice. Good advice, especially when conditions are not great. They were a little bit better during this morning's rush hour in the Twin Cities, and, really, across the state-- quite a contrast to yesterday, when there were nearly 600 crashes reported on Minnesota roads. The first snowfall of the year in much of the state made for dicey conditions.

Two people died, at least 45 were injured. It's the time of the year when many of us could use a refresher on how to drive safely on snow and ice. And our next guest has taught new drivers exactly that for 23 years. Jim Hudspeth teaches driver's ed in Shakopee and New Prague. He's on the line. Jim, welcome to *Minnesota Now*.

JIM HUDSPETH: Oh, thank you. Thank you.

CATHY WURZER: Good afternoon. Hey, gosh, I got to say, as many of us know, winter driving can be a little nerve-racking for even the most experienced among us, let alone a new driver, right? How do you help your students feel comfortable behind the wheel in snowy and icy conditions?

JIM HUDSPETH: Absolutely. Well, I'll just use today for an example. After Shakopee High School gets out, I'm going to take a student for their first lesson ever with me. And I'm going to actually drive to the location that will be less challenging. Now, that actually happens year round.

But on a day like today with these flurries flying around, I want to start them out in that non-challenging area with that snow around at the same time. So that would be my beginning point.

CATHY WURZER: OK, so instead of throwing them into the frying pan, you just kind of ease them into it. OK, that's a good move. What are some of the biggest mistakes that you see new drivers make in the winter? Because if you've got students that you're teaching in spring and summer, it is a little tough to try to explain what to expect when you've got snow, and it's tough to see, and it's slippery underfoot.

JIM HUDSPETH: Yeah. I would say the two biggest conflicts for teen drivers getting used to driving winters here in the upper Midwest, like in Minnesota, is that at least that early on, they do not have a sense that the traction that they perceive that they have in spring, summer, or fall is not as likely to be there when they start slowing down just to slow down or slow down to stop. And they start to skid a little or they start to skid a lot.

So one's management of speed, at all times of the year, but especially in the winter because of that traction up ahead, might not be there-- even though they might be used to it being there in those warmer months. The other conflict, I guess you could call it, would be where a student is used to making in motion, meaning when they don't have to stop for a turn, at a certain speed, and when they make that left turn at that certain amount of motion, they expect the car to go left. But with physics, the car may actually go off to the right because they're on snow and ice when they had the full intention of looking in the direction of going left, but it doesn't quite go to the left, it kind of skids sideways or at an angle.

CATHY WURZER: And that's always scary. My dad, this is probably not the right thing to do, but I remember my dad bringing me to an empty church parking lot when I was a kid, and it was snowing, he had me do donuts and steer into the skid-- probably not the best thing to do in a church parking lot, but is that something that you teach your kids, how to steer into the skid? Or is that the wrong thing to do nowadays?

JIM HUDSPETH: No, that is that would still be the right bit of advice, especially for parents that, understandable, they might be a little nervous, maybe even scared, to give supervised driving during the winter. But that parking lot with snowfall on it before it's plowed is such a good idea.

Whether it's getting up to 15 miles an hour in a straight line, and then the old heel on the floor and pressing down the brake moderately to see how that vehicle responds to that, and then maybe the next run get it up to 30 and repeat that same type of foot pressure on the brake, and then you can move on from there-- starting to make in motion left or right turns and see if the vehicle is able to actually go into that left turn versus kind of skid off to the right a bit, even though they want to make a left turn.

CATHY WURZER: Maybe that's good advice for any one of us to try to refresh our memories-- go into a snowy parking lot and try to do donuts and that kind of thing-- probably not the most legal thing to do. But I'm wondering also with braking, you mentioned braking, and that can be a little tricky with anti-lock brakes nowadays, right? And I had to get myself used to that at first. You're used to pumping the brake a little bit, but you can't really do that now.

JIM HUDSPETH: Right. The technology and ABS actually pumps the brakes for you. So it is not recommended that, whether it's a teen or more of a veteran driver, pumps the brakes of a vehicle with ABS. And you would have to find a vehicle from the 1980s and older than that to find vehicles without ABS, where pumping the brakes would be applicable.

CATHY WURZER: So the important work that you're doing is really great that you're teaching the next generation of drivers. What have you learned from the past 23 years?

JIM HUDSPETH: Oh, thanks. Well, what I've learned that teen drivers are better drivers than they think they are. They are sometimes a little too hard on themselves. So as an instructor, you really want to give off the vibe of being positive and looking at their driving with a glass half-full.

Obviously, you want to give them feedback when they make a mistake, but you don't want to dwell on that mistake. Because fresh off of making that mistake, that student is probably upset at themselves, and whatnot, and they're stressed out, and they're wondering about my reaction. But it doesn't take a driver's ed instructor to be positive.

You can be a mom or dad out there in that parking lot with the snow cover on it and just tell your son or daughter that mistakes are going to happen. And that's a part of the learning process.

CATHY WURZER: Right. By the way, I hope you tell your students, and a number of listeners when they knew that you and I were going to talk today, said, remind everyone to turn your headlights on, especially when it's snowing, which is true, and to sweep the roof of your car off. Because don't you just get so annoyed when folks are in front of you, it is snowing, and you're trying hard to keep your car on the road, and someone zips by you and they've got snow on the roof and it just blows into you? And it cuts your visibility down so much.

JIM HUDSPETH: Absolutely.

CATHY WURZER: What else do you tell your kids?

JIM HUDSPETH: I would also piggyback on that good advice of sweeping the roof off your car in your driveway or side of a house, but I would also make sure that your brake lights from the back are totally clear. Because as you need to slow down, sometimes even stop, you want that to be an eye-catching aspect to anyone behind you, whether they are hopefully or not-- but if they are tailgating or semi-tailgating, or even if they're back farther, being able to see that your brake lights are being illuminated as you step on them would be quite important.

CATHY Well, thank you for taking us to school here. We appreciate it. Thanks for the good advice for everybody.

WURZER: Absolutely. I hope you have a good day today, Jim. Thank you.

JIM HUDSPETH: Yeah, you too. Thank you.

CATHY Jim Hudspeth is a driver's education instructor in Shakopee and New Prague.

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