Taking The Pressure Off Cold Weather Driving

(NAPSA)-Heavy snow and slick ice on the roads can be a white-knuckle experience for even the most experienced drivers if the automobile isn't properly outfitted for the weather.

While knowing proper driving techniques is important, a good set of winter tires can be the difference between getting where you have to go safely and feeling your heart leap into your throat as your car slides through an ice-covered intersection.

So what do you need to know? Here's a list of commonly asked questions along with answers to help you understand how winter tires can help you.

What's the difference between "winter tires" and "snow tires"?

Winter tires are designed to work in all winter conditions, not just snow. The tire compounds are optimized to provide grip even on dry roads in weather below 45° Fahrenheit. Also, winter tread patterns are designed to provide excellent grip in icy and snowy conditions.

Can I use studded winter tires?

Studded winter tires were once perceived as loud and damaging to the road. However, through innovations in studding technology, the noise and road wear from the studs have been greatly reduced. Now, there is little difference between a studded tire and a winter tire without studs. For instance, Nokian Tyres, a Finnish company known for its expertise in developing and testing tires in demanding northern conditions, makes a winter tire, the Hakkapeliitta 8, that features a new tread pattern with 50 percent more studs than its predecessor. When compared to studded tires of the past, these modern studded tires cause only 20 percent road wear in relation to the typical studded tires of the '60s and early '70s. This new stud technology makes the tire extremely gentle on its driving surface, even while its winter grip properties are better than ever before.

I don't get much snow, so why do I need snow tires?

In general, non-winter tires are designed for performance at 45° and above. When used in temperatures below this, the tire compounds harden in the cold weather and lose their ability to grip. Winter tires are designed to provide grip in colder temperatures. This is why they're "winter" tires, not "snow" tires-they provide increased safety in cold, not just snow.

"The truth is, winter tires are engineered specifically to perform most effectively in harsh environments where colder temperatures are the norm," said Bernie Del Duca, president of North America for Nokian. "Winter tires don't just combat snow and ice, they're specifically designed and tested to function better in areas where temperatures can drop down below freezing for months at a time."

Can't I just get two winter tires?

While this used to be the conventional wisdom, this creates the hazardous condition of having one axle that has grip while the other does not, resulting in an increased chance of a spinout.

Will winter tires lower my gas mileage?

Gas mileage typically dips in the winter due to several factors. While winter tires may contribute, the effect is minimal; a decrease in gas mileage often has more to do with winter gas, which has special additives that affect engine performance. Roof racks and ski boxes add aerodynamic drag; these can also affect gas mileage.

Can I drive my winter tires all year round?

Using winter tires year round is not recommended. Modern winter tires may wear unnecessarily quickly, particularly on coarse spring roads and on hotter summer roads. The wear may be uneven as well. Many tire dealers offer storage for off-season tires, making seasonal tire changing easy for drivers.

When should I put on my winter tires and when should I take them off?

In the fall, once temperatures are consistently at 45° or below, any driver will benefit from the grip of winter tires. It may make sense to put them on a bit early to avoid the tire changeover rush that happens once the first snowfall hits. At the end of the season, it's best to remove winter tires once temperatures are consistently over 45°.

I have four-wheel drive or all-wheel drive so I don't need winter tires, right?

Acceleration with original equipment tires in winter conditions is relatively easy to achieve with AWD and 4WD. The problem comes when there is a need to steer or stop in a hurry and the tires do not grip. This is why you see so many SUVs and 4X4s off the road in the early season storms. All-wheel-drive and four-wheel-drive vehicles benefit from winter tires just as much as front-wheel-drive vehicles do.

How will winter tires affect my vehicle's handling and braking?

In general, dry handling and braking will be affected only slightly when using winter tires but the gains in winter weather safety are significant. The biggest change in dry handling and braking a driver could see would be a move from a UHP (ultrahigh performance) summer tire to a studded winter tire.

Learn More

For more facts on tires and to locate a local dealer, go to www.nokiantires.com.

Don't let cold weather get your tires down. Get winter tires.

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