No one likes to get stuck in a snow or ice storm while driving. Some health care occupations require a significant amount of travel. It is important for not only these employees, but all drivers, to be prepared. Here are helpful safety suggestions to think about for winter driving, some of which are also included on the Winter Vehicle Survival Checklist.
Pre-Season Warm Up
Get your vehicle serviced according to suggestions in your owner’s manual.

- Have your local mechanic or repair shop thoroughly check for any leaks, bad hoses, depleted oil levels or other items, and if there are problems, make the needed replacements or repairs.
- Complete necessary tune-ups.
- Inspect your tires: If they’re worn or show signs of deterioration, replace them before the snow flies. During this service, have all lights (headlights, high beams, tail lights, parking lights, turn signals and flashers) inspected. The old adage “seen and be seen” applies more than ever when it comes to winter driving.
- Check your battery. Your mechanic can check for sufficient voltage and while doing so, inspect the charging system and belts. If you need a full battery replacement, make sure to get one sufficient for the make and model of your vehicle.
- Inspect your coolant system and consider purchasing an antifreeze/coolant tester, which you can get for as little as $4 at many auto parts or hardware stores. This can be important because while a 50/50 mix of coolant and water will work for most regions of the country, you should always verify with a tester.

In-Season Readiness
Ideally, if inclement weather is frightful and/or if road conditions deteriorate, the safest practice is to pull off the road and not drive until conditions improve. However, if you have to drive in wintery conditions, the following practices are recommended:

- **Make sure your headlights are on in any inclement weather**, especially snow, sleet, rain or fog.
- **See and be seen** — Adequately clean the snow and ice off your vehicle, including headlights and taillights. This improves your visibility, as well as allows others to see you. Be careful when doing so, as many slip and fall injuries can occur because the ground may get ice- and snow-covered simply from what you’re cleaning off your vehicle. To help avoid this situation when cleaning off your vehicle, always wear proper footwear. There are also many manufacturers of anti-slip shoe coverings perfect for the winter — feel free to consult with your United Heartland Loss Control consultant for more details.
- **Windshield washer fluid** is a key item in the winter months. Completely fill your reservoir before the first snow hits and keep it topped off. A good practice is to check the reservoir each time you fill up for gas. Also be sure to purchase high quality fluids with low freezing temperatures – many on the market are good to -20°F. Always buy extra and keep a reserve gallon of fluid in your vehicle.
- **Good windshield wipers** are equally important as having fluid to clean your windshield. 90% of all driving decisions are based on an unobstructed view of the road, which means good visibility is absolutely essential – especially during inclement weather when vision may be obscured by water, road splashes, sleet or snow on the windshield. Most experts say wiper blades should be replaced every six to twelve months for optimum performance and driving visibility. Natural rubber deteriorates over time, so look into halogen-hardened rubber, as well as synthetic rubber, to gain longer life for your wipers.
- **Inspect your tires** on a frequent basis to include air pressure based on the tire manufacturers’ suggestion. Keep a tire gauge in your vehicle and check the pressure when the tires are cold to get the most accurate reading. Look closely at the tread and replace tires if you have uneven wear or insufficient tread — it should be at least 1/16 of an inch or greater at all times. Do the “penny test” to determine sufficient tread depth. With Lincoln’s head upside down, place a penny in the groove of the tread. If you can see Lincoln’s head, the tire needs to be replaced.
- **Practice defensive driving.** During inclement weather, defensive driving is critical. One overlooked aspect of this is planning and knowing your travel route. Check the weather, road conditions and traffic, plan to leave early to take the stress out of your drive, and make sure you have plenty of gasoline. If you get stuck in a traffic jam or snow storm, you may need more fuel to get home or keep warm. Here are a few other defensive driving tips:
  - The first and easiest defensive driving suggestion for inclement weather is to not drive if you don’t have to.
  - Slow down. Reducing your speed by a third or half of the posted limit may save your life.
– Keep a safe distance from the vehicle in front of you. On a clear, sunny day, it’s recommended to keep a four-second gap between you and the vehicle in front of you. In poor weather, add several seconds onto that figure.

– Be cautious of black ice (a thin layer of water that freezes clear, making the road look wet). This typically occurs in areas where melting snow runs across the road.

– Watch for signs that road conditions are getting dangerous (e.g. a lack of spray from passing vehicles will signify the road may be icing over).

– When visibility is limited, follow the edge of the right lane as your guide.

– Signal your intentions at all times, as vehicles following you will need to know when you’re turning.

– Scan the road and vehicles ahead of you for hazards, items in the road, etc.

– Listen to the radio – the National Weather Service will send a public alert notice to inform you of hazardous conditions.

Check out these references on how to handle skids:

• http://www.ehow.com/how_2144098_recover-skid-driving-ice.html
• http://www.wikihow.com/Drive-on-Black-Ice
• http://www.smartmotorist.com/driving-guideline/how-to-handle-your-car-on-snow-and-ice.html

Stuck in the Snow

First and foremost, if you get stuck in the snow, be sure to keep your vehicle’s exhaust pipe clear of snow accumulation to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning. Run your vehicle in the open with windows slightly down and just long enough to keep you warm.

Remember, it’s important to stay with your vehicle and not overexert yourself. Put bright identification markers (signs, flags, rags, etc.) on the antenna or windows and keep the dome light on to help you be seen.

It’s also important to stock your vehicle with extra supplies in case you are stuck for longer periods of time. This list can include, but isn’t limited to:

• Snow shovel
• Ice scrapers/brushes
• Sand or kitty litter
• Jumper cables
• Flashlight with extra batteries
• Non-perishable food
• Blankets
• A change of clothes
• Matches/candles
• First aid kit
• Pocket knife
• Winter hat, coat, gloves and boots
• Brightly colored signs or flags
Informing Employees About Inclement Weather

Ideally, everyone needs to take personal responsibility for safe driving any time of the year. To help inform traveling employees about approaching inclement weather, here are a few ideas:

- Proactively, develop an action plan to follow for inclement weather. For example, set guidelines as to when it is safest not to drive. Can the patient visit wait? Can someone be on-call that has a four-wheel drive vehicle for critical visits?

- Remind them to have two different routes set up in case the primary route is dangerous or closed.

- Utilize alternate communication systems such as cell phones and text messaging.

- Ask employees to tune into AM/FM radio stations, which have storm alert updates on school and road closings.

Remember to watch for changing conditions and stay safe on the road this winter! For more information on this topic and more, visit UnitedHeartland.com/walksafe or contact your UH Loss Control representative today.