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Season's first rain can mean driving problems

Road surfaces get slick and driving gets tricky when the first rains of the fall hit

The first few hours of the first rain following a dry spell can mean trouble on local roads.

With the weekend forecast calling for the first rains of the season, motorists throughout the region need to be aware of the hazards on the roads that can follow.

Oil and grease don't wash away during the dry season but come to the surface with the first rains of the fall and can make roads unexpectedly slick and treacherous. The hazard often catches motorists by surprise and that's often followed by an increase in fender-benders.

"The driving hazards created by snow and ice are obvious but the hazards that come with the first rain of the fall are a lot harder to spot," said Jason Tell, ODOT's regional manager for the Portland area. "Roads will be slick, especially in the first few hours, so we all need to slow down, provide extra distance to the car in front and be extra careful."

Here are some tips for driving in the rain.

Be aware of conditions

Rain can create dangerous driving conditions with reduced visibility, reduced traction between tires and the road and less predictable car handling. When it's raining, be cautious and give yourself more time to get where you are going. Also remember to:

- Slow down, especially through high water. Driving through several inches of water at high speed can cause you to lose control. Lowering your speed helps you watch out for sudden stops caused by disabled cars, debris and other hazards.
- Expect road surfaces to be slick if it hasn't rained in a while. Engine oil and grease build up on the road over time. When mixed with water from rain, the road can become slick. The first few hours of a fresh rain can be the most dangerous.
- Turn on your headlights to improve visibility. Disengage your cruise control.
- Keep your distance. A car needs two to three times more stopping distance on wet roads.

Maintain your vehicle

The most common vehicle problems in wet weather involve wipers, brakes, tires and defrosters.

- Check your wipers. Replace wiper blades regularly. Make sure your defroster is functioning properly, especially if you haven't used it in a while.

- Check your brakes. After driving through a puddle, check that brakes are working properly by tapping them gently a few times.
- Check your tires. Make sure tires are in good condition and are at the recommended inflation level. Tires should have at least 1/32 of an inch tread depth at any two adjacent grooves, the minimum allowable by law. Driving on over-inflated or under-inflated tires is dangerous on wet pavement.

Watch for hydroplaning conditions

Hydroplaning occurs when your front tires surf on a film of water. It can occur at speeds as low as 35 miles per hour, especially if tires are worn. If you hydroplane, ease off the gas, gently apply the brakes and steer straight ahead.

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