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“SMARTER” VEHICLES AREN’T FOOLPROOF

With four-wheel drive, antilock braking systems, infrared hazard detection, collision avoidance alarms, global positioning devices, cellular phones and other driving safety features, it’s not easy to end up stranded in a ditch during a winter storm – but it can still be done.

Advanced driving safety technology is helping drivers stay on the road and avoid collisions, and to summon help quickly when they are in trouble. However, even the best new safety devices don’t replace safe driving practices.

While four-wheel drive provides improved traction in snow and mud, countless sport utility vehicles (SUVs) flip over when drivers travel too fast or turn too sharply for road conditions and vehicle capabilities. Anti-lock brake systems, which prevent skids when a driver is forced to punch the break pedal, have not reduced crash statistics significantly.

New devices include infrared night vision to help the driver see pedestrians, wildlife, vehicles and other obstacles not visible to the eye. Also available are alarms that sound before a potential collision, giving

the driver a chance to change the course.

Some vehicles are being equipped to link via satellite to a computer network. On-board mapping and route planning are part of this system, and so is emergency service. In the event of a traffic crash, an emergency signal can be activated manually or automatically. If the driver is lost, help can find him.

No matter what new safety devices you have on board, though, do not abandon the usual safe driving precautions, including your winter preparations. Auto and phone batteries can still fail and some locations are out of cellular phone range, leaving you without wireless communication. Before you hit the road this winter, make sure you are prepared to make the best of it if the worst happens.

Keep this old-fashioned emergency gear in your car:

- ◆ Flashlight
- ◆ Jumper cable
- ◆ Sand or kitty litter for traction
- ◆ Ice scraper
- ◆ Snowbrush
- ◆ Shovel
- ◆ Warning and signal devices such as reflectors, flares and a red cloth to tie to an antenna

◆ Waterproof boots and gloves, blankets or sleeping bags

◆ Snacks and water

Try to avoid driving in severe weather. If you must, go slowly. Tell someone where you are going, your planned arrival time and the route you will be traveling. If you don’t arrive when you are supposed to, emergency crews can look for you.

If you get stuck or stalled, light flares and place one at each end of the vehicle, a safe distance away. Make sure the exhaust pipe has not been blocked by snow. Stay in your vehicle, with a window open slightly.

Wrap up in blankets and run the vehicle heater for a few minutes each hour. Don’t try to walk out in a storm. Stay with your vehicle until help arrives.

Safety Tip:

In the same way that workplace safety devices do not replace safe working practices, automotive safety technology is no substitute for safe driving and emergency preparedness. Your car may be getting smarter, but you still have to think for yourself. This is especially true during winter weather driving conditions.