

BREAKDOWNS – WHAT TO DO

One in five of Britain's motorists will break down this winter. Here's what to do if it happens to you...

If your car is regularly serviced, you'll be unlikely to suffer the inconvenience of a breakdown. However, it may still happen and if it does, it's as well to be aware of the most common causes – and some of the more obvious solutions...



Suspect 1 - Flat Battery

In the colder months, we put more strain on the battery than at any other time, by powering our heaters, de-misters, windscreen wipers and lights. Short journeys, such as the quick trip to work, or to the shops, can bring about the downfall of many motorists, as the battery, drained of its full strength, fails to recharge in the short time between departure and destination.

Action

Have your battery checked before the cold weather sets in. Ideally, you should check it once a month during the winter, topping up with distilled water as necessary. Always remember to turn your lights down or off when driving in full daylight and in clear visibility, and double check they're turned off before leaving the car.

Suspect 2 - Frozen Engine

In very cold weather, the engine can freeze if precautionary measures are not taken. Motoring organisation Green Flag reports that it dealt with around 3,000 cases last winter where engines had seized, the radiators having been starved of anti-freeze. On Boxing Day, one desperate motorist had poured neat anti-freeze over his ice-covered radiator and water pumps, but to no avail. The car had to be towed away, and left to slowly defrost in the warmth of the operator's service station for the rest of the holiday.

Action

While your vehicle may run perfectly well in summer, if it has not been recently maintained, dampness can set in, causing failure to any part of the complex ignition system. Keep anti-freeze levels topped up to maximum capacity: never fall short of the recommended measure as the damage can be expensive.

Suspect 3 - Flooded Engine

Heavy rainfall over recent years has led to an increase in flooding in many areas across the country. Unphased by the threat of danger, scores of motorists, choosing to brave the wet have found themselves in need of drying out.

Air filters on the front of any vehicle are designed to suck in air, thus keeping the engine cool. When immersed in water, the filters will naturally draw it in, flooding the engine and causing the vehicle to stall. While elevated four wheel drive vehicles may be more advantageous in standing the test of nature's hazards, the air intake systems on smaller cars will be far closer to ground level

Action

In either case, never drive through water that is more than two feet deep and - if you are at all unsure of its depth - take a detour. Should you successfully negotiate a water hazard, always test your brakes immediately afterwards, to ensure they haven't been affected.

Suspect 4 - Lock-Out

Hundreds of motorists using immobiliser key fobs to secure their vehicles found themselves locked out last winter, as the remote device was unable to penetrate their snow or ice covered windscreens.

Action

The reliability of your immobiliser fob during the rest of the year can lead to a false sense of security, as a device with a relatively flat battery can work even at some distance from your vehicle. However, following a snow fall this is often not the case. Be sure to change your batteries regularly on a hand-held immobiliser. If you do come unstuck in the snow, at least have your personal key codes to hand,

either for a remote or key entry system. This will allow a cheap and quick production of a replacement (the typical cost to replace a master key/locking system is around £150).

In summary, it all boils down to the old adage - prevention is always better than cure.