

What to Know About Winter Car Washes

[Winter](#) is hard on our cars. With the [ice](#) and [snow](#), road salt and dirt, our vehicles often get covered in grime.

But the dirty car you see is just the beginning. Salt, sand, dirt, ice, and [rotting leaves](#) can lead to rust that eats away at exposed metal and causes mechanical issues as well as hurts your car's resale value.

Keeping your car washed and clean during the cooler months is the best way to protect it from damage. And it will also help [keep it from aging](#). Here's some more information on why you should keep your vehicle washed this winter.

Winterize your car—before winter.

Before the temperatures dip down, take some time to [prepare your car](#) for the winter weather.

- Give your car a thorough wash and rinse, paying special attention to areas where salt, sand and ice can collect such as on the undercarriage and in little crevices.
- Apply a coating of wax, which can help protect against road salt and other debris.
- If you wish, you also can get glass coatings, plastic trim coatings and paint coatings at your local automotive supply store.
- Switch out cloth floor mats for all-weather rubber ones. They will be easier to clean during the winter months.

Make sure you do it on a warm day, 50 degrees or above, or indoors. Cold temperatures make it hard for wax or polish to dry and cure properly.

Wash your car every few weeks.

Your car doesn't have to be visibly dirty to give it a wash. You should schedule one every couple of weeks throughout the winter.

If washing a car at a car wash...

- Choose touchless car washes rather than the ones with the big twirling brushes. They will be gentler to your car's paint.
- Pay the extra to have your undercarriage sprayed. This is where salt and dirt tend to adhere.
- Make sure your car is dry when you leave. Road salt and dirt stick to wet cars.

If washing a car at home...

- Drive your car around the block a few times and crank up the heat to warm it up first.
- Wear waterproof gloves, clothes, and boots.
- Remove snow, ice and other debris from the car.
- Use warm water to help wash away the initial coat of road grime.
- Use a car wash detergent. (Avoid dish soap which can be hard on your car's paint.)
- Pay attention to the wheels and undercarriage. These areas are the most affected by winter driving.

- If you like, instead of the traditional wash, you could try a “rinse-less” or waterless wash. You may purchase these washes at your local auto supply store. Make sure to have lots of microfiber towels if you choose this option; you will need them.
- When you are finished with the wash and rinse, run the wipers for 10 seconds. This clears away excess water that can freeze later on.
- Open your car doors and dry the rubber weather seals to help prevent them from freezing shut. Do the same around your windows and your fuel door.

Importantly, though, if the temperatures dip below 30 degrees, skip the wash. You will end up with frozen locks and door handles.

Look out for rust.

Rust forms when iron-based metals such as steel are exposed to oxygen. The rust is actually the breakdown of the metal. It's common for rust to first appear during the winter months. Luckily, you can stop rust in its tracks. It's important to take care of rust, because it's considered normal wear and tear, and isn't usually covered on your [car insurance](#) policy.

- Check your car for rust each time you wash it. Lower door corners are popular places for rust to appear, as are wheel wells in front and behind tires.
- Identify the kind of rust. See this article in [Popular Mechanics](#) on how to fix each kind.
- Surface rust includes scratches and cracks in paint.
- Scale rust shows up as bubbles in the paint.
- Penetrating rust appears as flakes of metal and holes.

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