When is ice safe? There really is no sure answer. In fact, ice is probably never 100 percent safe. You can’t judge the strength of ice just by its appearance, age, thickness, temperature or whether or not the ice is covered with snow. Strength is based on all these factors — plus the depth of water under the ice, size of the water body, water chemistry and currents, the distribution of the load on the ice, and local climatic conditions.

SOME COLD FACTS ABOUT ICE

New ice is usually stronger than old ice. Four inches of clear, newly-formed ice may support one person on foot, while a foot or more of old, partially-thawed ice may not.

Ice seldom freezes uniformly. It may be a foot thick in one location and only an inch or two just a few feet away.

Ice formed over flowing water and currents is often dangerous. This is especially true near streams, bridges and culverts. Also, the ice on outside river bends is usually weaker due to the undermining effects of the faster current.

The insulating effect of snow slows down the freezing process. The extra weight also reduces how much weight the ice sheet can support. Also, ice near shore can be weaker than ice that is farther out.

Booming and cracking ice isn’t necessarily dangerous. It only means that the ice is expanding and contracting as the temperature changes.

Schools of fish or flocks of waterfowl can also adversely affect the relative safety of ice. The movement of fish can bring warm water up from the bottom of the lake. In the past, this has opened holes in the ice causing snowmobiles and cars to break through.

ICE TIPS

Think in terms of the thermometer rather than the calendar when deciding to go out on the ice. Just because it was okay on December 1st to go out on the ice last year, doesn’t mean it’s going to be safe on the same date this year!

Check with a local resort or bait shop about any known danger spots such as aeration systems or traditionally unsafe areas before heading out on the ice.

Have a plan of what to do if you do break through. Carry rope, ice picks and a flotation device to help save your life or that of a companion. During the winter of 2000, an ATV operator who broke through thin ice used a pair of ice picks to save his own life. A vest-style life jacket can provide extra warmth and flotation in case you fall through.

DRIVING ON ICE?

Don’t drive on the ice if you can possibly avoid it. If you must, follow these common sense tips:

Stay off the ice at night, especially during a snowfall. If that’s unavoidable, be very cautious and drive slowly since holes can open up very quickly. If you drive too fast you might not be able to stop in time.

BE A SURVIVOR!

Let’s say you have taken all the precautions and you’re going to try your luck at ice fishing. As you walk out on the ice, you hear a crack and fall through. Suddenly you find yourself immersed in water so cold it literally takes your breath away. And the pain is incredible!

What should you do? First, try not to panic. This may be easier said than done, unless you have worked out a survival plan in advance.

Two short lengths of broom handle with nails sharpened on both ends and joined with a piece of strong line can be carried easily in your pocket. In case of emergency, and while kicking, drive the nails into the ice and pull yourself to safety.

Don’t go back into a partially submerged vehicle to retrieve equipment.

What if someone else falls through and you are the only one around to help? First, call 911 for help. There is a good chance someone near you may be carrying a cell phone. Resist the urge to

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Many items found on shore or in your car, such as jumper cables, a garden hose, some branches, or skis, can be thrown or extended to the victim.

If the situation is too dangerous for you to perform the rescue, call 911 for help and keep reassuring the victim that help is on the way and urge them to fight to survive. Heroes by well-meaning but untrained rescuers sometimes result in two deaths.

VEHICLE ESCAPE
If your car or truck plunges through the ice, the best time to escape is before it sinks, not after. It will stay aloft a few seconds to several minutes depending on the airtightness of the vehicle. While the car is still aloft, the best escape hatches are the side windows since the doors may be held shut by the water pressure. If the windows are blocked, try to push the windshield or rear window out with your feet or shoulder.

A vehicle with its engine in the front will sink at a steep angle and may land on its roof if the water is 15 feet or deeper.

As the car starts its final plunge to the bottom, water rapidly displaces the remaining air. An air bubble can stay in a submerged vehicle, but it is unlikely that it would remain by the time the car hits the bottom.

When the car is completely filled, the doors may be a little easier to open unless they are blocked by mud and silt. Remember too, chances are that the car will be upside-down at this point! Add darkness and near freezing water, and your chances of escape have greatly diminished. This underscores the necessity of getting out of the car before it starts to sink!

YOUR FINAL ANSWER?
Remember, common sense is your greatest ally in preventing ice accidents. Five minutes of checking ice from shore, and systematic checks while on the ice can mean the difference between an enjoyable outdoor experience and a tragedy.