

What Are Winter Storms, and What Causes Them?

A winter storm can range from a moderate snow over a few hours to blizzard conditions with blinding wind-driven snow that lasts several days. Some winter storms may be large enough to affect several states, while others may affect only a single community. Many winter storms are accompanied by low temperatures and heavy and/or blowing snow, which can severely reduce visibility.

Winter storms can be defined differently in various parts of the country. Heavy snow in the south can be a dusting in the mountains. Check with your local emergency management office, National Weather Service (NWS) office, or [local American Red Cross](#) for terms and definitions specific to your area.

Some weather terms and definitions:

- **Winter Storm Watch** indicates that severe winter weather may affect your area within 12-48 hours.
- **Winter Storm Warning** indicates severe winter weather is in the area or expected immediately and can be life threatening.
- **Ice Storm Warning** is issued for ice accumulations of ¼ inch or more.
- **Snow fall** terms: A **flurry** is light snow with no accumulation. **Showers** are light snow falling for brief periods of time. **Squall** is brief intense snow fall accompanied by strong, gusty winds. **Blowing snow** is wind driven snow that reduces visibility and causes drifts. **Blizzard** has winds of at least 35mph and causes snow to fall vertically.
- **Sleet** is raindrops that freeze into ice pellets before reaching the ground. Sleet usually bounces when hitting a surface and does not stick to objects; however, it can accumulate like snow and cause a hazard to motorists.
- **Freezing rain** is rain that falls onto a surface with a temperature below freezing; this causes it to freeze to surfaces, such as trees, cars, and roads, forming a glaze of ice. Even small accumulations of ice can cause a significant hazard.
- **An ice storm** occurs when freezing rain falls and freezes immediately on impact; communications and power can be disrupted for days, and even small accumulations of ice may cause extreme hazards to motorists and pedestrians.
- **Wind Chill** describes the rate of body heat loss resulting from the combination of low temperatures and wind.