

WHY HAVE FOUR WINTER TIRES?



Ralph Seekins

A reader asks: “Why should I have four matching winter tires when I only have a two wheel drive car? Aren’t I just wasting money having more than I need?”

That’s not an unusual question and some owners have told me they get along just fine – and a lot cheaper – with winter tires on the drive wheels of their car or truck and regular tires on the others.

However, every driving expert will tell us that two dissimilar types of tires on your vehicle will cause your car or truck to have what they call a “split personality.” Tires with different tread designs, wall heights and strengths, rubber compounds, etc., will handle in a totally different way on one end of a vehicle than those on the other end – not a good thing in winter (or summer for that matter) driving. When driving on wet, slushy or icy roads you want your vehicle to handle at its absolute safest.

One of the biggest factors in how a vehicle will react in any given situation is the tires. Vehicles with dissimilar tires on the front and

rear will tend to understeer (where the front tires lose their traction first) or oversteer (where the rear tires lose their traction first) depending on the conditions and on which end of the vehicle the tires are mounted. And some tires – depending on tread design and how hard or soft the rubber compound is – will lose traction quicker on ice or snow than will others. For example, with dissimilar tires on front and rear, on slippery roads you might find the rear end of your vehicle develops a mind of its own and comes sliding around to the front as you try to come to a quick stop.

So, why do winter tires work better on snow and ice than summer tires or even all-season tires?

Tire manufacturers have developed special tread designs along with softer, more pliable rubber compounds to be used with those treads that allow these newer winter tires to grab better on ice or snow than any you may have used in the past. You’ll find that tire manufacturers like Bridgestone, Michelin, Continental, Dunlop, Goodyear and Pirelli even offer different types of winter tires that can be categorized into Performance Winter/Snow, Studdless Ice and Snow and Studdable Winter/Snow categories for most passenger cars and minivans. In all cases, you’ll find a “Mountain/Snowflake” symbol branded on the tire’s sidewall

identifying it as a tire meeting the required performance standard in snow testing. On some crossover vehicles, sport utility vehicles, light trucks or full size vans, the “Mountain/Snowflake” branded tires may not be available. However, there are alternatives that work quite well. Those tires generally are branded as “Alaska, Arctic, A/T or AT Blizzard, Ice, LT, Nordic, Snow (not Mud and Snow), Stud, Ultratraction or Commercial Traction tires.

So, when considering what winter tires are best for your vehicle, take some extra time to talk to your local tire expert. Let the expert know your winter driving challenges such as what terrain you live in or drive to. He or she can help you get the right tire for the winter driving you face. And then, make sure that whatever tire you choose you have four that are exactly the same mounted on your vehicle. If you have any questions, feel free to come by and talk to the folks in our Quick Lane Tire and Auto Center. They will gladly provide you with a no-charge, no-obligation consultation.

Safe driving for you and your family all winter long.

Ralph Seekins has more than 43 years' experience in the automotive industry. He started as a mechanic, worked in sales, and for the past 36 years, has been the owner of Seekins Ford Lincoln.