

“For All Those That Wish to Walk On Water - Frozen the Trick is Thick and Blue.....”

Winter provides an excellent opportunity to participate in activities on many of Massachusetts over 3000 lakes and ponds including fishing, skating, snowshoeing, cross country skiing, snowmobiling and more. Unfortunately every year people are injured or killed as a direct result of falling through thin or weak ice. The Sturbridge Lakes Advisory Committee (SLAC) is providing this article on ice safety as recommendations help ensure that all Sturbridge residents can safely enjoy winter activities.

The reality is there is no such thing as 100 percent safe ice. It is generally recommended that no one should venture out on any ice less than 4 inches thick. New clear blue ice is usually the strongest ice. Partially thawed, white ice embedded with slush or snow and honeycombed ice are significantly lower in strength than clear blue ice. As a general guideline if it is not clear blue ice you should double the thickness recommendations below for each activity, but remember that all lake attributes, including depths and currents are different and should be paid close attention to as you venture on the ice.

The figures in the table below are general guidelines for clear, blue ice on lakes and ponds. Always use caution, and don't venture out onto unfamiliar waters without checking ice thickness frequently.

Ice Thickness and Strength	
Ice Thickness (inches)	Permissible Load (clear, blue, lake ice)
2" or less	STAY OFF!
4"	Ice fishing or other activities on foot
5"	Snowmobile or ATV
8" - 12"	Car or small pickup truck
12" - 15"	Medium truck

Note: Vehicles may be banned from some lakes. It's best to check with the local lake association

Temperature, snow cover, currents, weeds and springs all affect the relative safety of ice. Ice is seldom the same thickness over a single body of water; it can be one foot thick in one place and a few inches thick a short distance away. Check the ice at least every 150 feet.

Ice thickness can easily be checked using an ice chisel, ice auger, axe, hatchet, or a cordless drill to penetrate the ice and then using a simple tape measure to determine the ice thickness. Be aware that ice tends to be thinner on lakes and ponds where there are spring holes, inlets or outlets. Don't venture on to ice bound rivers or streams as the currents make ice thickness unpredictable. Similarly, ice near bordering wetlands can be thinner due to groundwater seepage. In summary, ice thickness near the shoreline is often highly variable, so be particularly careful of where you gain access and your first few steps.

Also you want to make certain you do not overload the weight bearing capacity of a particular area of the ice by maintaining good spacing between gear, snowmobiles, ATVs and cars or trucks.

It is good practice when venturing out on the ice to have a safety plan. Always wear a flotation device such as a boating life jacket especially if you are testing the ice or snowmobiling (or ATV). Employ the buddy system maintaining good spacing and always carry ice picks. Bringing along a toboggan with an adequate length of rope not only provides a handy means of packing and transporting your equipment but provides an excellent safety device for reaching and retrieving those who have fallen through. It's a good idea to have a spare set of dry clothes and an emergency kit. Lastly, please do not leave any debris on the ice. Log and branch remnants from campfires can be a safety hazard for spring fisherman and animal feces and other debris will contaminate the lake.

What if you, a companion or pet fall through the ice? As with any emergency, don't panic! Call for help if there are people nearby. While it doesn't take long for the cold water to start slowing your physical and mental functions, you have more time than you might think; typically 2-5 minutes and perhaps longer if you are in good, physical condition. Kick your legs while grasping for firm ice. Try to pull your body up using "ice pins" that should be hanging around your neck. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources website provides instructions on how to make a simple set of ice pins or claws at www.dnr.state.mn.us/safety/ice. Once your torso is on firm ice, roll towards thicker ice. This will better distribute your weight. Remember that ice you previously walked on should be the safest. After you reach safe ice, don't waste precious time, you need to warm up and dry out. If you are in a remote area, this means getting to or starting a campfire. If you are in a more urban setting get to a car or house. Once there, get out of wet clothes, change into dry clothes to get warmed up and seek advice from your physician on medical attention. You need to warm up quickly to prevent hypothermia.

If a companion falls through the ice remember the phrase "Reach-Throw-Go" If you are unable to reach your friend from shore, throw him or her a rope, jumper cables, tree branch, or other object. If this does not work, go for help before you also become a victim. Get medical assistance for the victim immediately.

When walking on or near ice, keep your pets on a leash. If a pet falls through the ice do not attempt to rescue the pet, go for help.

The SLAC hopes you and your family enjoy a safe season with fun filled winter activities on both land and ice. Remember this ice related ditty: "Thick and blue, tried and true; Thin and crispy, way too risky."

For other ice safety tips and winter weather preparedness, check the [Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency](#) website. Happy Winter Fun, Games and Fishing and Remember Safety is #1!