

Safety: Checking Ice Thickness

No matter what you are going to do once you get on the ice - like fishing, snowmobiling, skating or even ice boating, it's a good idea to contact a local bait shop or resort on the lake about ice conditions. It's also important to do some checking yourself once you get there. Several factors affect the relative safety of ice, such as temperature, snow cover and currents. But a very important factor is the actual ice thickness.

Ice Chisel

The ice chisel or "spud bar" is one of the oldest methods of making a hole in the ice. In its simplest form, it consists of a metal rod with a sharp, flat blade welded onto one end that is driven into the ice in a stabbing motion. Depending on the sharpness of the blade, the thickness of the ice and the strength of the user, it can make a hole in the ice fairly quickly, especially when the ice is less than a foot thick.



Ice Auger

There are several varieties of ice auger. Some people like the hand auger for its low cost, light weight and low noise factor. The disadvantage of a hand-powered auger is that after a few holes, operator exhaustion becomes an issue. Some folks like an electric auger, with its low noise level rivaling a hand auger, with the advantage of a lot less work for the user. An electric auger does, however, need an external 12-volt battery, which can be something of a nuisance to lug around. Gas augers boast the fastest speed in drilling through the ice, but are heavier, noisier and generally more costly than hand or electric models.

Cordless Drill

There is one tool, that many households have hanging on the pegboard in the basement or on a shelf in the garage that can make checking ice thickness a quick and easy task - a cordless rechargeable electric drill. With a cordless drill and a long, five-eighths inch wood auger bit, you can drill through eight inches of ice in less than 30 seconds. Most cordless drills



that are at least 7.2 volts will work, but the type of bit is critical. You need a wood auger bit since they have a spiral called a "flute" around the shaft that metal drilling bits don't. The flutes pull the ice chips out of the hole and help keep it from getting stuck, much in the way a full-sized ice auger works. It is important to dry the bit and give it a quick spray of silicone lubricant after each use. Otherwise, the next time you open your toolkit, you'll find your once shiny drill bit looking like a rusty nail!

Tape Measure

Some people claim they can judge thickness by where the chisel or drill suddenly breaks through, but that happens so quickly, it's easy to overestimate the thickness. It's smarter to use a tape measure or something like an ice fisherman's ice skimmer handle with inch markings to put down the hole and hook the bottom edge of the hole to determine the ice's true thickness.



Other things to keep in mind when checking ice

Ice is seldom the same thickness over a single body of water. It can be two feet thick in one place and one inch thick a few yards away due to currents, springs, rotting vegetation or school of rough fish. You need to check the ice at least every 150 feet, especially early in the season or any situation where the thickness varies widely.

White ice, sometimes called "snow ice," is only about one-half as strong as new clear ice so the above thicknesses should be doubled.

Vehicles weighing about one ton such as cars, pickups or SUVs should be parked at least 50 feet apart and moved every two hours to prevent sinking. It's not a bad idea to make a hole next to the car. If water starts to overflow the top of the hole, the ice is sinking and it's time to move the vehicle!



ICE SAFETY CHART
2 INCHES STAY OFF!
4 INCHES One Person ~ Foot Travel
5 INCHES Getting Better ~ Several People/Snowmobile
8 - 12 INCHES Car or Small Pickup
12 INCHES OR MORE ~ Truck [medium size]

REMEMBER: "ICE TESTERS ARE FOUND IN THE SPRING"