



10 Car Care “Musts” You Don’t Want to Skip

1. Tire Pressure

WHY: Over-inflated tires ride roughly and suffer premature wear at the center of their tread. Under-inflated tires decrease fuel economy, cause imprecise handling, suffer premature wear at the edges of their tread and can overheat and fail at highway speeds. Tires typically lose about one pound of pressure per month through normal seepage, and as seasons change, tires lose or gain another pound of inflation pressure with every 10-degree change in outside temperature.

WHEN: Check tire pressures, including the spare, at least once a month when the tires are cold. Always follow the inflation pressure recommendations in your owner’s manual or on the tire information label located in the glove box or on the driver’s door jamb. Do not use the inflation pressure molded into the tire sidewall. This is the pressure needed to achieve the tire’s maximum rated load capacity, and it may not be the correct pressure for your car.

BOTTOM LINE: The correct tire pressure will make tires last longer and help maximize your vehicle’s fuel economy while ensuring optimum handling for comfort and safety.

2. Engine Air Filter

WHY: Your vehicle’s air filter prevents dust and dirt from entering the engine. A dirty or clogged air filter restricts airflow and reduces engine performance and fuel economy while increasing exhaust emissions. A damaged filter, or one that does not seal properly in its housing, will allow unfiltered air to enter the engine. This can lead to increased engine wear and, in some applications, damage to electronic engine control components.

WHEN: Check the air filter every six months or 7,500 miles. Typically, your repair shop will inspect the filter at each oil change. You can check it by holding it up to a 60-watt light bulb. If you can see light through much of the filter, it is still clean enough to work effectively. However, if the light is blocked by most of the filter, replace it.

BOTTOM LINE: Dirty air filters decrease fuel economy, and damaged or leaking filters can result in more extensive -- and expensive -- problems.

3. Battery Terminals/Clamps/Cables

WHY: Power from the battery terminals flows to the rest of your vehicle’s electrical system through the cable clamps and battery cables. If these components or their connections are corroded or loose, they might be unable to transmit the power needed to start the engine and operate other systems.

WHEN: Battery terminals, clamps and cables should be inspected at every oil change. If there are signs of corrosion, or if you notice other indications of electrical problems such as slow engine cranking or dimming headlights at idle, have your repair shop test the battery, charging and starting systems and clean and tighten connections as needed.

BOTTOM LINE: No one enjoys unexpectedly discovering their car won’t start. Properly maintaining the battery will extend its life and greatly reduce the odds of it failing at an inopportune time.



4. Windshield Washer Fluid

WHY: Rain, insects, grime and other debris on your windshield can compromise your vision if your windshield wipers cannot remove them. The proper washer fluid, delivered effectively to the glass, helps your wipers remove these contaminants.

WHEN: Check your washer fluid reservoir monthly and more often if you use the washers frequently. Top it off with a washer solution formulated to aid in the removal of insects and other debris. In winter, be sure to use a solution with appropriate antifreeze protection. Finally, test the washer spray nozzles for proper operation and aim.

BOTTOM LINE: Whether your windshield becomes covered with bugs in the summer or ice, salt and slush in the winter, it's critical to keep it clear for your safety.

5. Engine Oil

WHY: Without an adequate supply of clean oil, your engine will wear more rapidly and could even overheat, seize and be destroyed. Oil doesn't freeze like water, but its viscosity, or thickness, does increase as the mercury drops. Lighter-grade oils reduce the load on your car's battery and starter, allowing more rapid cranking and starting. Lighter oils also reach critical engine lubrication areas much faster than heavier oils, greatly reducing wear in the seconds following a cold engine start.

WHEN: Change your engine's oil and oil filter at intervals specified by the vehicle manufacturer, and follow the more frequent "severe service" recommendations if your driving habits meet the criteria described in your owner's manual. Always use oil with the proper API service classification and SAE viscosity grade recommended by your vehicle's manufacturer for current temperatures. Watch for oil leaks beneath your vehicle and have any leaks corrected in a timely manner.

BOTTOM LINE: Oil is the lifeblood of your engine. Not maintaining the proper levels, using the wrong oil or not changing it frequently enough can destroy your engine. Plus, oil leaking onto hot components could result in a vehicle fire.

6. Windshield Wiper Blades

WHY: Windshield wipers are easy to overlook until you find yourself in a pounding rainstorm. If your wiper blades are worn, cracked or rigid with age, the wipers will not adequately remove rain, grime and other debris that can obscure your vision. If the wiper blades are sufficiently deteriorated, the metal wiper blade frame could contact and permanently damage your windshield.

WHEN: Check your car's wiper blades at each oil change or whenever they fail to wipe the glass clean in a single swipe. The life of a rubber insert is typically six to 12 months, depending on its exposure to heat, dirt, sunlight and other elements. Streaking and "chattering" are common clues that the rubber is breaking down and replacement is needed.

BOTTOM LINE: Worn-out windshield wipers not only compromise your safety, they can even lead to a damaged windshield.



7. Coolant/Antifreeze Protection

WHY: The primary task of an engine coolant is to transfer heat from the engine to the radiator, where it is removed by the passing airflow. Engine coolants also prevent the cooling system from freezing or

boiling; protect the engine and cooling system from rust and corrosion; and lubricate the water pump seals and other cooling system components. Coolant that fails to do its job can cause overheating in summer, freezing in winter and increased wear and corrosion year round. All of these conditions can lead to cooling system problems and major engine damage – up to and including complete engine failure.

WHEN: Check the coolant level at every oil change. With a cold engine, the radiator should be completely full, and the coolant level in the remote reservoir should be at or above the “cold” level marking. Simple and inexpensive testers are available to check the coolant’s level of antifreeze protection. Always top off the system with a 50/50 mixture of coolant and water to avoid altering the antifreeze level. Be aware that some coolants come premixed with water, while others do not. Several different engine coolants are in use today. Check your owner’s manual for the type your engine requires. Have the system flushed and refilled with fresh coolant at the interval specified in your owner’s manual. This can vary widely, from every two years to more than 100,000 miles, depending on the coolant type used.

BOTTOM LINE: Maintain the proper coolant level and antifreeze protection in your car’s cooling system to avoid overheating in the summer, freezing in winter and internal wear year round – all of which can result in costly damage to your vehicle.

8. Tire Tread

WHY: The four points where your tires meet the road are the only things that control where your vehicle goes. Having good tires with sufficient tread depth is crucial, particularly in wet or snowy conditions. Worn tires with little tread are much more likely to hydroplane on wet pavement or lose traction in the snow, resulting in a loss of braking power and steering control.

WHEN: Check the tread depth of your car’s tires whenever it appears low. Insert a quarter upside-down into a tire groove. If you can see above George Washington’s head at any point, start shopping for new tires. Uneven or excessive tire tread wear may indicate the need for suspension repair or wheel alignment, both of which will extend the life of your tires.

BOTTOM LINE: Driving a vehicle with low tread depth puts you at increased risk for a crash. To slow wear on your tires, keep them properly inflated (see item No. 1) and perform any needed suspension repairs or wheel alignments as needed.

9. Accessory Drive Belt Tensioner

WHY: One or more reinforced rubber drive belts transfer rotation of the engine’s crankshaft to various accessories that help your vehicle function properly. Common belt-driven accessories include the alternator, water pump, cooling fan, power steering pump and air-conditioning compressor. Belts that are too loose allow slippage and reduce efficiency. Belts that are too tight can damage bearings and cause premature component failure.



WHEN: Drive belt condition and tension should be checked at every oil change. Many cars have automatic belt tensioners that require no maintenance. On others, technicians must use a gauge to check and adjust the tension manually. To prevent being stranded by a broken accessory drive belt, have your car's belts replaced every four years or 60,000 miles.

BOTTOM LINE: Accessory drive belts power a number of systems. Some are vital to proper vehicle operation, while others contribute to passenger comfort or make the car easier to operate. If a belt comes loose or breaks, the resulting problems can range from simple inconvenience to major engine damage.

10. Brake Fluid

WHY: The fluid in your car's hydraulic braking system transfers your foot pressure at the brake pedal into stopping power at the wheels. An adequate supply of clean brake fluid is essential for safe vehicle operation. Old, moisture-contaminated brake fluid, or a low fluid level that allows air to enter the system, can lead to brake "fade" or a complete loss of braking power. Contaminated brake fluid also increases wear and corrosion throughout the braking system, which often includes expensive electronic antilock brake system (ABS) components.

WHEN: Inspect the brake fluid level at every oil change. If the level has fallen below the "low" mark on the fluid reservoir, it usually indicates major brake wear or a leak somewhere in the system. Have the brakes inspected as soon as possible. Most vehicle manufacturers recommend the brake fluid be replaced periodically to flush moisture and contaminants from the system. Every two years is a common interval. Check your vehicle owner's manual for specific recommendations.

BOTTOM LINE: Old brake fluid or fluid at low levels can result in your brakes fading or completely failing. Fluid contamination can also accelerates wear and corrosion of various braking system components.