



## It's Time for a Reality Check

✓ **M**ost car owners surveyed recently by CAA have misperceptions about proper vehicle maintenance. That's not surprising, since technological advances in vehicles over the last 10 years have changed the way you need to care for your car.

The survey also showed that car owners who were not sure about proper maintenance schedules sometimes did either too little or too much maintenance in specific areas. As a result, money spent on vehicle maintenance is not always spent wisely.

Much of this confusion and neglect can be attributed to a lack of specific knowledge about what the car manufacturer recommends in the service schedule included in the owner's manual. To make matters worse, some service shops have their own set of service guidelines that call for more frequent service than is recommended by the manufacturer.

So, what's a car owner to do? Following the service recommendations in the owner's manual is best, but here are some no-nonsense recommendations from CAA about maintaining your car.

## ✓ Changing the Oil

**O**ne of the most beneficial things you can do to extend the life of your vehicle is change the motor oil regularly. But regularly does not mean "frequently." The old rule of thumb of changing the oil every 4,800 kilometres may not apply to today's advanced engines. Technologically improved lubricants are capable of lasting longer while still doing a good job of protecting your engine.

Under normal driving conditions, the oil-change schedule can be extended to 12,000 kilometres, and several luxury imports can go as high as 32,000 kilometres. The trick to determining the best oil-change schedule for your vehicle is understanding what kind of driving you do. Severe conditions may require you to change oil more frequently. Check your owner's manual for the manufacturer's definition of different types of driving conditions and the recommended schedule and type of oil for each condition.

## ✓ Tires

**R**eplacing your tires before it's necessary can be an expensive proposition, but that painful experience can be avoided with regular tire rotation and inspection. Tire rotation is even more important on front-wheel drive vehicles, sport utility vehicles, and light trucks, since these vehicles tend to wear tires unevenly, front to back. Your owner's manual will give specific recommendations about how often to rotate tires, but, as a rule, rotate between 10,000 and 12,500

kilometres. Consider rotating tires at the same time the oil is changed.

Rotating the tires provides an excellent opportunity to carefully inspect them. Uneven wear is a tip-off that the tires have been operated at the wrong inflation pressure. Certain tire wear patterns indicate that the suspension needs alignment or the tires are out of balance. Finally, a regular inspection will let you know how much longer you can expect your tires to last, or if they need to be replaced because of unusual lumps or bumps.

## ✓ Belts and Hoses

**M**odern rubber materials have made belts and hoses very durable with relatively long lives. Fortunately, neither belts nor hoses suddenly fail — they deteriorate slowly over time. Regular inspection can allow you to plan for replacement before they fail. But, it's also easy to make sure these two critical items get checked regularly. Combine the inspection with another maintenance item such as the oil change.

## ✓ Antifreeze

**A**ntifreeze contains additives that prevent corrosion in the cooling system. When these additives come to the end of their useful lives, wear and corrosion begin. Sediment builds up in the cooling system, causing a loss of cooling ability. Flushing is required for proper operation.

Many new cars come with antifreeze designed to last four or five years, but the ordinary product found in most auto parts stores is good for only two years. It's important to know what type of antifreeze you have so you can avoid spending money unnecessarily to replace it.

## ✓ Brake Inspection

**B**rakes rarely fail suddenly. They deteriorate slowly with wear. Brake life depends on many factors, such as terrain, city versus country travel, driving style, and even climate.

Since there is no such thing as a regular brake replacement schedule, it's wise to have your brakes inspected regularly. Brake inspection is most logically done in connection with tire rotation, since the wheels have to be removed to properly inspect brake pads and shoes. Warning signs that brake repairs may be needed include strange sounds or feeling the steering wheel pull when you apply the brakes.

The brake inspection is an ideal time to check the brake fluid. An unusually low fluid level indicates a leak, but the possibility of contamination is just as serious. Contamination causes corrosion, which eventually leads to other brake problems. Brake fluid should be clear to amber coloured. A sure sign of contamination is a darkening of the fluid to a tea or coffee colour. Brake fluid absorbs moisture, so water contamination is common in areas of the country where the humidity is high.

## ✓ Transmission Fluid

Recent improvements in transmission fluid have dramatically increased its expected life. In fact, many new cars offer no means of checking the fluid level or adding fluid, since fluid is good for the life of the car. Check the owner's manual for the manufacturer's recommended replacement schedule, which can range from 48,000 to 160,000 kilometres, and frequently requires the replacement of a filter as well. Understanding this schedule not only protects your transmission from premature failure, but also eliminates an unnecessary fluid change.

Severe driving conditions such as trailering or heavy hauling can shorten transmission fluid's life. A dark brown colour, accompanied by a burnt smell, is a clue that the fluid needs to be changed.

## ✓ The Tune-Up

The term "tune-up" is obsolete. Spark plugs last up to 160,000 kilometres. There are no points to replace or carburetors to rebuild. You can't adjust the engine's timing, and an array of sensors and microprocessors control everything from the engine to the door locks.

However, oil still needs to be changed, air and fuel filters need to be replaced occasionally, and, depending on the car, spark plugs will need infrequent attention. Check your owner's manual to see what is necessary.

If you are having problems with starting,

hesitation, missing, or loss of power, services sold as "tune-ups" won't help. It's time for a professional diagnosis and repair.

## ✓ Gasoline Octane

Some motorists are under the false impression that premium-grade gasoline gives their car more power, better fuel economy, or a longer life. Some even think they are giving their car a "treat" by filling up with an occasional tank of premium. The reality is that using premium fuel in a vehicle that was designed to run on regular is a waste of money.

Premium fuel is needed by a handful of vehicles with high-performance engines. These vehicles require premium fuel to prevent pinging and its associated loss of power. Combustion chamber deposits in some older engines may cause pinging. In many cases, the least expensive fix is to use a higher grade of gasoline rather than to have the deposits mechanically removed.

Federal regulations require that all fuels sold in the United States contain detergents to prevent the build-up of deposits in the engine's combustion chamber. Several name-brand gasoline marketers promote their own fuel additive packages that have detergents formulated to clean up deposits. With few exceptions, their premium fuel contains the same additives as their other grades of fuel, including regular. Therefore, additives marketed to remove deposits, clean fuel injectors, and improve performance are generally viewed as a waste of money.



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