

Making Sense of Your Car Maintenance Schedule

by David Tenenbaum

It's a key selling point: Auto makers finally have figured out how to make their cars travel farther between maintenance appointments. Some of the advances reflect elimination of troublesome carburetors and mechanical ignition systems. Other advances rely on improvements made outside the auto plant, like better oil or tires. Many advances reflect greater use of electronics, which not only need less maintenance but also can monitor your real maintenance needs.

The flip side of reduced maintenance requirements is confusion among some diligent car owners. As [Sympatico](#), msn.com's auto advice site, recently noted: "Many owners are confused about which items need service and often place all vehicle maintenance in this category." Such confusion about reduced maintenance needs can lead, ironically, to undermaintenance, Sympatico reported. "Experts estimate that about 70% of today's vehicle owners neglect routine maintenance on their vehicles, compared with 40% 15 years ago."

What's a car owner to do?

Check each car part, fluid, tire

Oil—Everybody knows the drill: Change the oil every 3,000 miles, or every three months, whichever comes first. Just how much confusion that adage is causing is clear in e-mails from contributors to a recent *Home & Family Finance Resource Center* "What's Your Story" question.

Mike, from New Hampshire says, "The oil change interval keeps increasing because the oil is now a synthetic blend or full synthetic. Conventional oil is a paraffin (wax) based oil that takes longer to reach the top of the motor and thus allows more friction damage. The synthetic blend or full synthetic adheres to the engine components. I have my oil changed with synthetic blend every 4,000 miles and so far I have 160,000 miles on the motor with zero problems."

Another What's Your Story contributor, Jonathon, from Tennessee says, "I have learned that the maintenance schedule put out by manufacturers is pretty good stuff. Most say for short trips, change your oil every 3,000 miles, and for long trips every 5,000. I have always followed that and have never had a vehicle develop any motor troubles that could be attributed to faulty lubrication. I have had several motors outlive the vehicle they are in."

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With oil, *how* you drive matters almost as much as *how far* you drive: Short trips, frequent cold starts, towing a trailer, or driving in dusty conditions add up to "severe" driving that shortens the oil-change intervals—and entails extra inspection and replacement of filters. Many dashboard-mounted oil-wear indicators calculate the remaining oil life based on your driving habits. Always buy the recommended grade and weight of oil.

Filters—Filters clean air entering the engine, and the fuel, oil, and perhaps cabin air as well. All filters need periodic attention and replacement.

Fluids—Power steering, brakes, automatic transmissions, windshield washers, and of course coolant must be kept full with appropriate fluid, and periodically flushed as well. Keep in mind that low brake fluid signals a leak, which is better found in the shop than on the road.

Hoses—Modern cars rely on an endless supply of hoses that need periodic inspection. Replace a damaged, cracked, or bulging hose immediately.

Belts—Both V-belts, also known as fan belts, and serpentine belts need periodic checkups and perhaps replacement. Don't forget the timing belt, an internal, expensive-to-replace belt that can practically destroy your engine if it breaks. Observe the manufacturer's recommendation on replacing it: If you plan to keep your vehicle, safe is better than sorry when it comes to timing belts.

Brakes—As you drive, listen for a screech that indicates exhausted pads or rotors. When your car is up on a rack for other reasons, brake inspections make a lot of sense. The parking brake needs periodic adjustment. Take the owner's manual to the shop; insist that the shop follow its recommendations.

Tires—A dashboard low-inflation warning light is a nice safety feature, but it's probably less accurate than a good pencil-type tire gauge. Check monthly, or before any long trip, to save gas, tire wear and tear, and perhaps an accident—under-inflation can cause tires to overheat and explode. Periodic rotation will extend your mileage; tire warranties require routine rotation to remain effective.

Tie rod ends and constant velocity (CV) joints—Get periodic inspection. If the boot protecting a CV joint tears, grit can enter and cause expensive damage.

Battery—Battery connections should be clean and tight, and the mounting solid.

Wipers—Windshield wipers can be damaged by the ultraviolet portion of sunlight, and they will wear out. You usually can get away with low-cost refills, rather than buying an entire blade, and some auto-parts stores even will install the refills for you. Trust your eye—when a wiper is streaking water on your windshield, it's probably time to replace your wipers. Don't forget rear wipers, if you have them.

Tune-up

Many new cars will go 60,000 to 105,000 miles between tune-ups, largely because about the only parts left to tune up are the spark plugs. The troublesome distributor and coil are long gone, and some makes also have replaced heavy, trouble-prone sparkplug wires. Many car makers consider the term tune-up to be obsolete, and prefer routine maintenance instead.

Routine maintenance

Manufacturers set schedules for periodic maintenance, and these are the only reliable guide to what your car needs. Take the owner's manual to the shop when your car's in for periodic maintenance, and insist that the shop follow its recommendations if you're getting shop recommendations for more or more frequent work.

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Consumer Reports checked prices for a 60,000-mile service on a Nissan and found that dealer prices ranged from \$269 to \$1,078. "Most dealers went well beyond the recommendations in the owner's manual," the magazine reported. "A few added services Nissan advises against, such as putting additives in the fuel and oil."

In all automotive matters, follow the manufacturer's lead. They know your vehicle better than you. As maintenance intervals get longer, some unscrupulous shops may profit from confusion by gently suggesting that a bit of extra maintenance is a good thing. It is—for them.

Final maintenance notes

The definitions of "occasional" and "periodic" depend on your vehicle manufacturer's recommendations, and your mileage, driving style, and conditions. Occasionally check all the warning lights: If you turn the ignition switch to "on" without starting the engine, they all should be lit.

The owner's manual is the final arbiter of what your vehicle needs.

You're not required to get routine maintenance done at a dealer, but keep receipts to document proper maintenance in case you need an in-warranty repair.

The new era of car maintenance may take a bit of study and adaptation, but it can save time and money in the long run, so long as you remember that "low-maintenance" does not mean "no-maintenance."

Useful resources

[Maintenance schedules and cost estimates for many makes/models Sympatico, the MSN auto site](#)

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