

FALL

# CAR CARE



# Fall Car Care: The Basics

**W**e've all heard about the importance of winterizing your car. But when should you do so — and how?

October is National Fall Car Care Month and offers the perfect opportunity for you to make sure your vehicle is ready to handle the snow, sleet and freezing temperatures to come.

The following should be included in any “winterizing” package offered by your local repair shop, but you can also handle many of them yourself. Make a checklist to ensure you are covering all of your bases.

- **Battery:** It is important to test your battery and charging system. A fully charged battery in good condition means you won't be stuck with an engine that won't start in cold weather.

- **Drive belts:** Inspect the underside of your drive belts for signs of wear. The American Automobile Association recommends replacing your belts every 60,000 miles.

- **Engine hoses:** Check your cooling system hoses for leaks or loose clamps. You can also feel and squeeze the hoses for brittleness or sponginess.

- **Tire pressure:** Test your tire inflation pressure more frequently in fall and winter because falling temperatures mean falling tire pressures.

- **Air filter:** The AAA recommends you check your car's engine air filter by



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holding it up to a 60-watt light bulb. If light can be seen through much of the filter, it is still clean enough to work effectively. If the light is blocked, it is time to replace it.

- **Lights:** Properly working lights are crucial during the

fall and winter months, when evening sets in a little quicker. Check the operation of all headlights, taillights, brake lights, turn signals, emergency flashers and back-up lights. Replace any burned-out bulbs by following the

procedures stated in the owner's manual.

- **Wiper blades:** Replace any blade that leaves streaks or misses spots. Winter wiper blades come wrapped with a rubber boot to reduce ice and snow buildup. Consider

installing these if you live in areas with heavy snow during the winter.

- **Brakes:** Have your brakes checked and changed at the first indication of a problem, usually identified by a squeaking or grinding noise.

# Driver's Best Friend: Spare Tire

**I**n a pinch, a properly inflated spare tire can mean the difference between getting home safely and paying more than \$100 for a tow.

Maintaining the spare tire can often be an afterthought until you need it the most. Luckily, with a simple check of the air pressure and accessibility to the tire, drivers can be prepared to safely change a tire.

## TIRE PRESSURE

Tire pressure drops one pound per square inch (PSI) for every 10-degree drop in temperature, according to the American Automobile Association. So check your tires weekly.

The proper inflation pressure will generally be listed in your vehicle's owner manual and/or noted on a sticker on the inside of the driver's-side door. You can find a tire pressure gauge for less than \$20.

## THE SPARE TIRE MECHANISM

In most cars, the spare tire can be found under the floor of the trunk in a reservoir that will also include a wrench for removing the lug nuts and a jack for lifting the vehicle. But on SUVs or trucks, the spare tire is usually suspended on a cable underneath the vehicle.

The cable mechanism must be maintained to ensure safe, proper

usage when you need it. Lower and raise the tire to see if the cable is moving freely. The last thing you need is an inaccessible spare tire when you're stuck on the side of the road with a flat.

If you have trouble moving the tire smoothly, spray the mechanism with a rust penetrant. If that doesn't help or if the cable seizes to move, it is time to repair it.

## CHANGING YOUR TIRE

Have you changed a tire before? Trying to do so for the first time while battling winter elements – snow, sleet or cold hands – can be a definite obstacle. Here are some basics to remember:

- Find a safe spot to pull your vehicle over.
- Turn on your hazard lights to alert other drivers of your situation.
- Use your wrench to loosen the lug nuts.
- Use the jack to lift the vehicle off the ground – just enough to where the tire spins freely.
- Remove the lug nuts, pull off the tire and place the spare on the car.
- Use the wrench to secure the lug nuts.
- Lower the vehicle and tighten the lug nuts as snug as possible.



# Wiper Fluid Check and Change

**Y**ou're driving home from work in early November and it begins to rain. The shorter daylight period of the fall means your visibility is likely compromised. The falling temperatures mean the rain could quickly turn to sleet.

Do you know what is in your windshield wiper reservoir? It is recommended that you add a solvent suited for cold weather as soon as summer ends.

It may cost you a few dollars more at your auto care

center, but will be well worth the spending if you're stuck in a potentially dangerous situation. Look for fluid that can stand up to freezing temperatures, snow and ice.

The wintertime also means your windshield will be hit by

sand, gravel or rock salt spread on the road by transportation crews trying to keep them safe. Keeping your fluid tank full for the winter months will help you achieve maximum visibility for all of these cold-season challenges.

## CHANGING YOUR FLUID

The process of changing your wiper fluid is an easy one.

- Open your hood and locate the reservoir, usually

marked with a windshield wiper icon on the cap for convenience.

- Check the outside of the container – which should be opaque – to see if your coolant is below the required-level lines.

- If so, add the appropriate quantity of properly diluted fluid into the reservoir.

## CHECKING WASHER PUMP

Checking your wiper system ahead of the winter freeze is important to ensure proper working order. If you're experiencing issues with the feature, you can troubleshoot the pump by turning your key to the "on" position without starting the engine.

Listen carefully when you try to use the washer fluid. Do you hear a humming sound? If you're having a hard time hearing the pump and there someone is nearby, ask them to listen closely.

If you don't hear any sounds, check the fuses. The owner's manual will explain which fuse belongs to the windshield washer pump. If the fuses do not appear to be damaged or worn, this is a sign that you may need to have the motor replaced.



# Teaching the Teens

If you have teenagers who will be operating your vehicle – or one of their own – it is crucial they know the basics and quirks of it.

It is also important to teach proper maintenance care from a young age. Doing so now will lead to a lifetime of responsible car ownership.

## SIGN A CONTRACT

A fun way to challenge your children to maintain his or her vehicle is by creating and signing a parent-child contract. Keep the agreement short-term to maintain your teens' interest in the practice and include tasks such as weekly or monthly requirements like checking tire pressure, scheduling oil changes and topping off fluids.

If the parameters of the contract are broken, be ready to dole out a lighthearted punishment: Have them wash and wax your car for you – it's a win-win.

## TAKE A CLASS TOGETHER

Local community colleges, car groups and auto shops put on community car classes that can be a great way of sparking your children's interest in vehicles. Even if they're not passionate about all things cars, taking a class can help foster an understanding and respect for proper vehicle maintenance and emergency situations.



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With the amount of free video content online, you can also attend a DIY class together on the Internet. Find maintenance and basic service videos and watch them together, taking notes with any questions for follow-up.

## TELL THEM STORIES

Teenagers have a lot going on. If you want them to remember the importance of proper car care, tell them visual, impactful stories about what can happen to cars in

neglect. Don't rely on scare tactics; rather, focus on sharing personal experiences about what you have gone through or witnessed.

Have you been stranded on the side of the highway after skidding on the ice? Tell your story and then follow-up with

tips on how to safely steer through a similar situation.

Maybe you were once completely locked of your frozen car? You can teach them the importance of keeping a can of de-icing solution on hand for these predicaments, as well.

# Avoid the Holiday Breakdown

Every year, as tens of millions of travelers take the road for their holiday trips and vacations, at least one million people will be stranded. But many of them would be able to avoid these problems if they started planning in the fall.

That figure is an estimation by the American Automobile Association, which is ready to deploy its assistance specialists to help with lockouts, battery replacements, jump starts, extricating vehicles from snow and towing cars for repair.

The AAA anticipates its busiest time of year to be between December 19 and January 2. And while being

stranded on roadway is probably not on your wish list, it is an issue you or someone you know may have to face this holiday season.

## BE PREPARED

Drivers can avoid some roadside breakdowns by keeping their vehicles properly maintained. The AAA

advises motorists to follow their recommended maintenance schedule and make sure their vehicle is ready for the holiday travel season.

Have a certified technician check your vehicle's fluid levels, lights, brakes, exhaust system and heater/defroster. You should continue to schedule regular services, including

oil and filter changes, throughout the winter driving season at the intervals recommended by the vehicle manufacturer.

## COMMON ISSUES

Every year during the holiday season, this is how AAA service calls are broken down:

- Nearly 300,000 requests for help with a dead battery.
- More than 80,000 failed batteries repaired on the spot.
- Nearly 200,000 sets of keys retrieved from inside locked vehicles.
- More than 166,000 tire changes.
- About 21,000 vehicle extrications.

## HANDLING BEING STRANDED

The AAA projects its roadside technicians can fix the issues of more than three out of five stranded motorists and send them on their way. The remaining two travelers will still need a tow.

Keeping you and your family safe while you're stranded is important. This means pulling your car fully onto the shoulder of the road and keeping your hazard lights flashing.

You could also benefit from having an emergency kit full of blankets, batteries, water, flashlights and other essential items to keep you safe and warm during long delays.



# All About Snow Tires

**D**ashing through the snow on worn-out or ineffective tires isn't as merry as it sounds.

When it comes to driving through winter weather, your tires are the ones that take the brunt of the punishment. But you can arm your tires to make sure you reach your destination safely – even when the snow makes it difficult to do so.

## SNOW

Many car-makers and repair technicians recommend mounting snow tires to your vehicle before the winter driving season. These specially designed tires are made to help you trek through the snow – even in areas of heavy accumulation.

If you choose to go down this route, be sure to splurge on all four tires. Your alignment can be thrown off if you drive on two standard and two snow tires, and that can cause bigger problems for your vehicle down the road.

And keep your standard tires handy. Once the winter lets up, you'll be happy to get them back on your vehicle to improve your fuel efficiency and overall handling.

## ALL-SEASON TIRES

Another option is all-season tires that you drive year-round – winter and summer. This will help you avoid having to remember to change



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your tires before the winter weather or needing to store two sets of rims.

While all-season tires are more effective than a standard tire, you won't get the full advantage of having specialized snow tires on your vehicle. These tires are designed

specifically to help drivers blast through snow and are tested vigorously for this purpose.

## TIRE TYPE AND TREAD

Snow tires are the recommended options in areas with

heavy winter weather. But you may still decide to stick with your regular tires for price or convenience purposes. If you do, be sure to check the tread depth of your tires. Replace any tire that has less than 3/32 inches of tread, the American Automobile Association stated.

Check multiple spots on the tire when assessing your tread depth. Uneven tire wear can indicate alignment issues, out-of-whack wheel balance or suspension problems that must be addressed to prevent further tire damage.

# Look for the ASE Blue Seal

**M**any of the aforementioned preventive maintenance activities can be done from the comfort of your own garage.

But maybe you don't feel comfortable sliding under your vehicle to change the oil. Or maybe your car needs a repair that you just don't have the expertise to execute. Hopefully you have a trustworthy mechanic who you have been using for years.

But if you don't, you should look for certain things when trying to select a shop for your car. Doing a little research beforehand can give you peace of mind that your car is being serviced correctly, while also saving you money and time in the process.

## WHY SO IMPORTANT?

If you ever want to skip that air filter change or scheduled tire rotation, then you could use some guidance from the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (ASE). The organization says vehicle owners will benefit from longer car life, increased gasoline mileage and better resale value if they stick to a preventive maintenance plan.

That means checking your vehicle's owner's manual to put together a plan. Build a spreadsheet to help you remember when, where and why you had your car serviced. Also track the mileage so you can stay on schedule for time-sensitive services such as oil changes and wiper-blade installations.

## CHOOSING A SHOP

The ASE recommends a comprehensive approach to choosing a reputable, quality shop. No longer bound to randomly choosing a name out of a



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phone book, you can conduct an online search for customer reviews and company websites to help you make your decision.

Among ASE's tips:

- Ask your friends, family members or co-workers for their recommendations.
- Look for facilities with clean, updated exteriors and parking lots.
- Check the shop's policies on estimated repair costs, diagnostic fees and service guarantees.

- Gauge the company's front-desk service quality and professionalism of the staff as a whole.

## ASE REPUTATION

So why should you listen to the ASE when it comes to tips and tricks for quality car service?

The institute was founded in 1972 as a nonprofit organization focused on improving the quality of automotive service and repair. The group

conducts voluntary testing and certification of automotive technicians seeking more credibility in their industry.

When you see the ASE sign or the blue and white shoulder insignia, you know that your mechanic has undergone some type of certification process. Ask which areas they are certified in and if their facility is a member of the ASE Blue Seal of Excellence Recognition Program.