

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of August 13, 2012 – Motor Vehicle Maintenance

Vehicles are vital for us to perform our job tasks. They get us where we need to go and carry the necessary equipment and supplies for us to get the job done. Having a vehicle for our work is essential. However, if they are not properly maintained, whether we use a truck, SUV, or simple passenger vehicle, we are setting ourselves up for an untimely inconvenience. I must confess that while I am handy enough to change a tire or perform an oil change or replace batteries, or even oil and air filters, I am far from being an accomplished mechanic (don't ask me to replace a tranny or even brakes – although I once replaced an alternator, my back paid for it!). Yet even the most un-mechanical-minded person can be on top of their game when it comes to ensuring that their vehicle - company or personal – will run and perform as intended and therefore, reduce the chances of experiencing an untimely mechanical failure. Surprisingly, the maintenance requirements that we need to follow is hiding no farther away than the glove box. Every car is supplied with a maintenance schedule either in the owner's manual or in a separate maintenance log book. A few minutes assimilating these requirements will help avoid common car-maintenance pitfalls.

Tire pressure needs to be checked continuously. That's because tires naturally leak. Figuratively speaking, underinflated tires suck up gasoline. Under- or overinflated tires wear out sooner, and deliver the same emergency maneuver handling as marshmallows. As a first step, visually inspect the tires to see if they are flat. If they look deflated, it probably means it's time to fill them. If you are not mechanically inclined, or doubt your mechanical ability, many auto shops will help you out – even without a charge! The important thing is to always perform a walk-around and look at the tires. Furthermore, front and rear tires wear differently and should be rotated to even that wear. Your owner's manual will have a recommendation on both pressure and rotation periods.

Tires wear out, but they also time out. The tire industry says tires are toast after five years, but they're selling tires. It all depends on heat, sunlight and ozone conditions. There's little argument from any pundits that after seven years those black donuts are dried and better off holding down a farmer's tarp than transporting people. If you're not sure how old your tires are, a tire shop can read the date code stamped into the sidewall.

Here's a news flash: It's much easier to avoid hitting things you can see. Simple as it is, that's the concept behind replacing your windshield wipers before they fossilize into noisy uselessness. Fall is the ideal wiper replacement time: after the blade-baking summer and before the fall and winter nastiness. Depending on location, wiper replacement may be an annual affair in the Southwest to a biannual chore in northern climates.

There are no more "tune-ups." Valves no longer need adjusting, ignition timing is computer controlled and there are no carburetors to fiddle with. About all that's left of the old tune-up drill are the spark plugs. These are often good for 100,000 miles, so don't change parts just to change

parts. Instead, save up for those big 60,000- and 120,000-mile services when the timing belt, spark plug wires and coolant are due for replacement.

"If some is good, more is better" thinking does not apply to octane. Here the rule is to supply whatever octane the engine is rated for and call it done. Higher-than-required octane does not yield more power or mileage, only oil company profits. Some engines are rated for premium 91 octane fuel but can burn 87 octane regular, thanks to the magic of knock sensors. In that case, run regular gas if puttering around surface streets, and premium fuel if full-throttle driving is part of your daily repertoire.

Oil changes every 3,000 miles used to be required jobs, just like cleaning the accumulated fuzz from record player needles or defrosting freezers. Today, advances in engine design and lubricants make oil changes something to be done when the schedule calls for it. Some cars call for 5,000-mile change intervals, some up to 15,000-mile stints. Others have a variable timer. Follow the schedule and use the oil called for by the manufacturer.

Semi-clogged air filters hurt fuel economy for the same reason you don't like to run with a potato in your mouth. So, when is your filter dirty? Under a Norman Rockwell schedule of small-town errand running and church duty, an air filter might not see much grit. But grimy city surface streets or just looking at a dirt road on a map are often enough to overwhelm air filters. This one is about conditions. If you go near dirt, the air filter may need changing twice as often as the schedule calls for.

Note to the Wandering Unconscious: If you notice anything different about your brakes — sound, feel or response — they are telling you to visit a mechanic. Now!

Is the Check Engine light on? Then make sure the gas cap is on tightly before calling the dealer. No joke, this is one of the most common ways of setting off your car's diagnostic system, since a loose gas cap defeats the fuel system's venting arrangement.

A vehicle checklist is a valuable tool. However, if we wind up just checking off items without really checking, we are not doing any good. Vehicle inspections should be conducted every day at the beginning of the shift — before we operate them. Then, throughout the day, as we get ready to enter the vehicle, we need to perform a 360-degree walk-around. This is to ensure the vehicle has not sustained any damage from our last trip. Tires, mirrors, windows need to be examined. This also gives us the opportunity to note any potential hazards, such as other vehicles or objects that are in close proximity and therefore, by noting their presence, we can avoid hitting them.

Great things are not accomplished by those who yield to trends and fads and popular opinion

Jack Kerouac — American Writer