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TELE-CHECK "Your Check Is Welcome!"

"I have seen quite a few distributor caps crack under the pressure."

Charlie Ritter, manager of Standard Auto Parts in Washington, said belts and hoses should be changed every three years. Good belts cost \$6 and hoses \$8, he added.

Fan belts keep the alternator running. Without the alternator, the juice stops running into the battery. To check for proper tension, the belt should not give more than about a half inch when pressing the thumb on the middle of each belt.

Road-service bills can be avoided by checking the battery's fluid level and cables. Fluid should touch the filler neck and pucker a little. Battery cables should be tight and should not be frayed. Corrosion (light-colored powder) can form on terminals, which should be cleaned.

Summer driving can be dusty. Air filters clean the air that mixes with gas, resulting in proper gas/air mixture; however, if the filter is not cleaned, dirt blocks the air and burns more gas than necessary, Pascarella said.

The cooling system works hardest during hot summer months.

"If you don't use good antifreeze and keep the system flushed out, you can clog the heater/cooler system and do damage to the radiator, which costs about \$150," Ritter said.

Motor oil is the lifeblood of the engine and is easily checked by pulling the dipstick out, wiping it clean, inserting it all the way back in, then pulling it back out again. The oil level should be between the "ADD" mark and the "FULL" mark.

Oil changes take only about 20 minutes and, according to Ritter, should occur about every 3,000 miles. The owner's manual should be checked for oil-change intervals and engine-oil capacity.



Photo Diana for The Pittsburgh Press

Hold a light inside an air cleaner to determine if light shines through; if not, buy a new filter.

"All of these items are covered when the car is inspected, and if properly maintained, you could get about three to five more years out of the engine.

"Most of the time, people are scared and think they can't handle these maintenance items, but many times it's something minor," Ritter said.

Of course, vacationing usually entails being on the road for long distances; hence, good tires are a must. One of the most neglected items is air pressure in tires, said Pascarella.

"People don't realize you can lose a couple of pounds in just one month. Underinflation is a major cause of tire failures."

Traveling high speed over turnpikes hour after hour, underinflated tires are very susceptible to just disintegrating.

A tire that is only 25 percent low can lose one-fifth of its useful life.

"If a tire required to have a pressure reading of 35 pounds is run at 18 pounds, it probably will last one half its life and will be very susceptible to blow-outs," Pascarella said.

Tires need to be checked when they are cold, not hot, because air expands when hot and you will get a false pressure reading, he said.

Weak shocks create unnecessary

tire wear, but are easily checked by bouncing the car up and down hard at each wheel. A car with good shocks should only bounce once after releasing it. If worn shocks are indicated, a qualified technician can install new ones.

Because winter driving is so taxing on a car's engine, spring is a good time for a tune-up. If slower acceleration or rough idling is noticeable, a tune-up is probably needed.

Car maintenance involves not only checks under the hood, but throughout the body of the car as well.

Summer brings with it road tar and tree sap; therefore, before waxing, use kerosene or tar remover to handle the job, said Rich Salem, co-owner of Salem's Auto Body in New Kensington. Waxing every three months with a good liquid wax will protect the paint, but waxing too frequently will wear the paint. The car should be washed once a week with a good cleaner to leave a nice finish, he said.

A can of wax costs \$6 to \$7, averaging six to eight waxes. Tar remover costs about \$2 for the same number of uses, said Ritter.

After removing tar, waxing, and washing the car, keep it parked in the shade because sun can dull the color richness of the paint.