

“Car Care 101”

“Something under the hood made a loud noise” you tell the mechanic as he grins from ear to ear, observing your ignorance. Three hundred dollars and four bus trips later, you’re back on the road. Does this sound familiar? Maintaining an old car can be troublesome and expensive. But there is something you, the average driver, can do to make your old car run like new again. Most drivers do not realize that with a little care and a few dollars, they can make their old cars, even Fords, run much longer. This article will discuss several minor maintenance tips you can do to keep your old car running.

Check the Oil

Changing and checking your car's oil is the most important part of maintaining a healthy engine. Experts, such as Jiffy Lube, recommend that you change your oil every 3,000 miles or every 3 months. This is to prevent the oil from becoming too thin, which increases friction in the engine. Friction (a.k.a. 'viscosity breakdown') is what causes the engine to "blow up" as most people say. For those of you who do not keep track of their car's miles, or have broken odometers, try to check your oil about once a week. Even though you may have just checked it, and it was fine, older cars tend to burn and leak more oil than newer cars.

If you are willing to change your own oil, it will cost about \$10-15 for new oil and a filter. The filter keeps small metal particles and other objects from entering the engine. If you would rather not crawl under your car, places like Jiffy Lube and Rapid Oil Change would be more than happy to change your oil, filter, anti-freeze and wiper fluid for around \$30. Plus, they will supply donuts and coffee while you wait. This is a pretty good bargain if you like donuts. You may not believe that your engine is worth \$30 every three months, but that’s a small fraction of what a new one will cost you.

Spark Plugs and Wires

Now on to the electrifying topic of spark plugs. Plugs supply the spark needed to burn the gas. Over many miles, these can become burned or dirty, causing the power plant under your hood to “miss” every once in a while. The plug wires connect the plugs to the distributor, which distributes the sparks. These wires can become frayed over time from age or other factors, resulting in poor gas mileage.

Plugs are pretty cheap, usually around 75¢ apiece for the ones at Kmart, which are adequate for most cars. The wires are a bit more costly, so check yours closely before you spend money on a new set. Changing plugs on a smaller engine is generally easier than changing the oil, but if you have never done it before, take it to a mechanic or a friend who knows how, and learn from them. The effects of bad plugs aren’t as obvious as bad oil, but you can save hundreds of dollars in gas over a few years by simply changing them once a year for around \$5.

Let it Breathe

If the oil is the blood of the engine, then the exhaust is the respiratory system. The exhaust system allows the engine to breathe. Back pressure caused by a clogged or defective exhaust can result in overheating and poor gas mileage. Repairing the exhaust system is the most expensive part of maintaining your car, so make sure it needs it before you take it in. Sure signs are when you can’t hear your AM radio because of the rumbling beneath your car. Also, if you see exhaust smoke coming from under your car rather than behind it, there is probably a hole somewhere.

Replacing a muffler or tailpipe is not something that is easily done, especially on rusty cars. It would be easiest to take your car to a muffler shop to have it done by professionals. Depending on where you go, the cost of labor should not be more than \$30-40. The price of mufflers varies depending on what brand you buy and what model of car you have. Generally, the newer the car, the pricier the muffler. Even though this is a little more expensive, you do not need to do it as often as your oil or spark plugs.

Dust Masks

Another thing that helps with gas mileage is the air filter. The air filter acts like a dust mask for the engine, keeping dirt and debris from entering through the carburetor. When the filter has collected too much dirt and other debris, air cannot get in as easily. A dirty air filter can throw off the mixture of air and fuel the engine needs to run smoothly.

Changing the air filter is the easiest thing you can do to help your car run better. You just take it out, find a matching one at NAPA, and put it in: no dirt, no grease. When you can no longer see light through the filter when you hold it up to the sun, it is time for a change. Filters only cost about \$3-4, but like spark plugs, can make a huge difference in your gas bill.

You don't have to be a mechanic to make your car run well. It's not important that you don't know how to do any of this maintenance. What is important is that you are aware of what you can do to save a little money, and making sure that it gets done. The time you spend tending to your car is far less than you would spend waiting for a bus or taxi. If you don't want to do the work, it is still cheaper to drive it to the mechanic shop early than to have it towed there later.