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10 Ways to Keep Your Car Out of the Shop

THESE DAYS, CARS are made better than ever before. Drivers of most new models can expect a good 200,000 miles' worth of engine life — as long as they follow the instructions in the owner's manual to the letter.

Sadly, most of us never reach that milestone, because of bad driving habits that take years off the lives of our beloved cars. Even worse, our nasty driving habits can end up costing us thousands in repairs that could have been prevented.

But there's hope. Here are 10 ways you can add longevity to your car and keep it out of the shop.

1. Start It Up Properly

"Most of the wear on an engine happens when you start the car," says Edmunds.com's automotive expert Karl Brauer. "If you can get the starter stuff down, you'll find cars will wear much less over time." How do you do that? Make sure any extra accessories, such as headlights or climate control, aren't on when you turn the ignition. If you do, you're asking the engine to work harder than necessary right off the bat.

An even more destructive habit: revving the engine. Believe it or not, this won't help warm up the car. In fact, revving can do serious damage to the engine and significantly shorten its life. Engines need oil to run smoothly. But right after you turn over the ignition, the oil is still sitting in the pan. When you floor the gas pedal, you're asking the engine to work overtime without lubricant — putting metal to metal. Wear out this most important drive train component and you can expect to pay \$3,000 to \$5,000 for a new one.

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2. Come to a Complete Stop

Ever pull out of a parking spot and pop your car into drive while it's still coasting backward? If the answer is yes, you can kiss your transmission goodbye.

By shifting into drive while the car is still in reverse, you're asking the transmission to do the work of the brakes — and that will wear down your gears, says Edmunds.com's Brauer. Essentially, you're putting several months of wear and tear onto that transmission compared with normal driving, he says. So while a transmission driven properly should last more than 100,000 miles, one owned by an aggressive or impatient driver will give out long before that. Fixing the transmission will run anywhere from \$1,000 and up, while a brand new one sells for at least \$3,000.

And by not braking before shifting gears, you're also wrecking your drive shafts, which propel the wheels forward. If you notice that your front suspension and handling start to feel a little sloppy, it could be a sign of damaged drive shafts, warns David Champion, the director of automobile testing for Consumer Reports. Replacing both can cost \$500.

3. Don't Run the Needle Down to Empty

You may not realize it, but sediment collects at the bottom of the fuel tank over time. You never want to do anything to unleash that dirt into your fuel system. Even the smallest amount could clog or damage parts, says Tony Molla, spokesman for the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence and a former automotive technician.

You can stir up sediment by driving with less than a quarter of a tank of gas. Prolonged abuse could wreck your fuel injector, which costs about \$80 to \$100. You may also need a new fuel filter, which is twice as expensive. And if you're the type who loves to drive on fumes, you could be in for a big surprise. By continually using the filthiest gas in your tank, you could, one day, need a fuel-system flush and cleaning. Expect to pay a startling \$1,000 for this service.

4. Turn Gently

Cutting the steering wheel too far to the right or left — something nearly everyone is guilty of while parallel parking — can also do damage. By turning the wheel to the point where it can move no further, you're putting 50 times more wear and tear on your steering pump than normal, Brauer says. Most people will never need to replace the steering pump; it should last the life of your car. But if you continually put massive stress on it, prepare to fork over \$300 to \$500 for a new one someday.

5. Check Your Tires

The next time you roll into a gas station, take a minute and check your tire pressure. Too little or too much pressure can cause all sorts of problems. If you drive with too little air, your tires will get quite hot; excessive heat will wear out the tread much faster than normal driving. If you drive with too much air, less rubber will hit the road than necessary. Next thing you know, the outside portion of your tire will be doing all the

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work and wearing out faster than the inside. And don't fool yourself thinking that your tires are under warranty. Since proper air pressure is different for every car, check the sticker on the door. Never look at the tire itself for guidance, he says.

Checking your tire pressure regularly can save you a bundle. New tires these days start at \$100 — each.

6. Don't Ride the Clutch

We all know we aren't supposed to ride the clutch while we drive. But some of us use the clutch to avoid rolling backwards while on a hill. If the clutch is balanced just right it will even propel the car forward on an incline. While this is a neat party trick, it doesn't exactly add longevity to the life of the clutch. If you want to get 100,000 miles out of it, you'd better use the emergency brake instead. Another clutch-preserving tip: Pop the car into neutral and take your foot off the clutch while sitting in traffic. Ignore this advice, and you'll have to shell out \$500 for a new one someday.

7. Listen to Your Car

Every little sound your car makes is a cry for help. Ignore it, and a small problem could turn into a huge one. The most common sound people ignore is squeaky brakes. As soon as you hear the sound, you probably need new brake pads, says Lynne Cardwell, a co-owner of Sacramento, Calif.-based Car Care Center and a member of the Automotive Service Councils of California. That's a \$100 problem. Keep driving until the metal starts to screech, and you'll need to replace the brake rotor. That'll set you back \$400 or more.

Steering systems need attention, too. Once you hear the whine of the steering wheel, you need to have it checked. If you're lucky, you may need to replace only the fluid or an aging hose. But if the pump is damaged from continued driving with insufficient fluid flow to the pump, the pump itself will need to be replaced, Cardwell says. As we mentioned earlier, that'll cost \$300 to \$500.

8. Heed Those Warning Lights

Don't ignore the warning lights on your dashboard. While we all lead busy lives and may think the problem can wait, it usually can't. By waiting even a few days, you can turn a simple problem into a disaster, says Cardwell. In some cases, you need to stop your car immediately and get it towed. Otherwise, you could do serious damage that could cost thousands of dollars to fix.

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Here are two such situations. The first is when you see that your engine is overheated. "If the temperature gauge crosses into the red zone, it is as dangerous to your car as a heart attack or stroke is to the human body," says Cardwell. The price of driving even a few extra blocks could cost you your engine. You'll also ruin your engine if you drive after the loss of oil pressure. The engine oil light will pop up if this happens. Oil is the lifeblood of your engine, says Cardwell. Drive without it, and you'll cause catastrophic damage.

9. Drive More

Many people don't realize it, but not driving your car can be as damaging as driving it too hard. "The worst thing you can do with a machine is not use it," says Molla of the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence. So if you have a spare car, make sure you use it for more than a Sunday drive.

What can happen if you let your car sit too long? First, the battery might go dead. That's because certain electrical devices are always on in a car, drawing power from the battery. (The clock is one example.) A battery needs to be run in order to recharge itself. If it dies, you'll have to spend \$80 or more for a new one — plus labor and the tow you'll need to get the car to the shop.

Rust is another concern, since moisture can build up under your car. One of the first components to be affected is the brake rotor. Once the rotor rusts, it must be replaced. As we mentioned earlier, a replacement will cost you at least \$400. So if you're planning on going on a long vacation, ask a family member or friend to take your car out for a spin from time to time.

10. Neglect Will Cost You

The single most important thing you can do for your car is take it in for regular maintenance. Every year, drivers neglect more than \$60 billion worth of basic auto maintenance, according to the Car Care Council, a nonprofit organization. Not only will your car break down faster, but lack of maintenance also undermines the safety of your vehicle.

Most important: the oil change. Regular oil changes every 3,000 or 4,000 miles can double the life of your car, says Cardwell. But you also need to have the filters changed, belts checked (and sometimes replaced) and all of the fluids inspected. This is sometimes referred to as a health check or a general inspection. Do it roughly four times a year — which should cost you about \$200 annually — and your car could last 250,000 miles, she says. (During the later years, some small parts may break down, but replacement costs should be minimal.) "You could have an inexpensive hose that, if ignored, could cause a huge problem with overheating," Cardwell says.

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