

New car? Preventative medicine for car maintenance

by CNS

So, you just bought your first car. Or, maybe it is your sixth or seventh vehicle. What is next? If you believe all you have to do is fill it with gas, think again.

CAR MAINTENANCE - Experts urge you to listen for the warning signs that your car may need attention. CNS Illustration by Michael S. Balash. Mechanics say if you want to keep your car running smoothly, take care of it. Research from the Car Care Council in Bethesda, Md., a nonprofit advocacy group, confirms that nine out of 10 vehicles on the road are in need of routine maintenance or repair.

Neglected vehicles contribute to 5 percent of all accidents. They lead to 26,000 deaths, nearly 100,000 disabling injuries and more than \$2 billion in lost wages, medical expenses and property damage each year, according to the council.

PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

"Just like your body, you should listen to your car," said Joe Helaney, co-owner of Hills & Dales Autocare in Canton, Ohio. "There are signs on that dash while you are driving that you need to be aware of. Those lights do mean something, whether it is a check engine light, a service soon light, a coolant-overheat light, or an alternator light that tells you your charging system is not charging the battery.

"Preventive maintenance to your body and the car is very close," he said. "If you ignore things that happen to your body you're in deep trouble. If you ignore things that happen to your car, again, you are asking for trouble."

Ken Williams, an Automotive Technologies instructor in the vocational annex at Canton South High School, said one problem he sees with newer cars is that they are so reliable.

"Years ago, they always designated October as car care month," he said. "People would take their cars in (to a garage) and get them checked and ready for winter. Today, cars are so reliable and really take very little maintenance to keep them going."

As a result, he said, there is a tendency for people to not take their car in for service as often as they should, at least twice a year.

READ THE MANUAL

Terry Barnby, owner of the Gold Star Autocare station in Canton, Ohio, said one of the problems he sees is a lack of understanding about what cars need to work properly.

"People just don't take care of their cars the way they used to," he said.

"Preventive maintenance is not done as it should be, and I think a lot of it is because people don't read the owners manual that comes with their car.

If they did, they would know how to care for them." He said that if a car owner followed everything the owners manual recommends, the car would probably never break down because everything would be replaced.

"I had a car in here recently for an oil change. It was 29,000 miles since it was last done," he said. "The sticker was in the corner of the window noting when it was time to change it again. It was tens of thousands miles overdue, but some people wait until a light kicks on, on the dash, before doing anything."

Another customer tried putting in his own thermostat, but it was backward, so he brought it in to us. That is good because he knew there was a problem and sought out an expert to help before the car was damaged due to incompetence.

Barnby said that younger drivers aren't that mechanical, not like it was when he was growing up.

"Back in the day, we all worked on our cars, but then the '90s came and spoiled the young blood," he said, noting that it just seems that younger people don't take care of what they have like they used to. "We have as many guys having us check their oil as we do women. Cars are an investment," he said. "By reading the owners manual, you can learn a lot about your vehicle."

Here is a list of other tips necessary to keep your car running smoothly:

- Auto technicians agree that reading the owners manual is essential, even if it isn't the most exciting reading, if you want to know how to care for your car. "That is No. 1," said Barnby.

- Buy a car you can afford to maintain.

- Regularly check the fluids, including oil, brake, power steering, transmission, cooling system, and the window washer.

- Change the air filter every other oil change, but no longer than 10,000 miles.

- Change oil every 3,000 miles or three months. (Recycle what you take out).

- Check for oil leaks.

- Check lights: headlights, parking lights, brake lights (most importantly, the license plate lights) to make sure they are working.

- Take your car to a professional at least twice a year for maintenance.

- Check the air pressure and treads in tires. Tires have wear bars that will tell you when it is time to replace them. If the bars are not wearing evenly, the car needs to be aligned. Also, tires should be rotated every 6,000 miles.

- Check for cracks in alternator, water pump, power steering and timing belts.

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