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Inspect Tires Before Fall Road Trips

Road trips are an autumn tradition for many people. Excursions to see the fall foliage can be awe-inspiring, but drivers must make sure their vehicles can handle such jaunts. Tire inspections are essential before hitting the open road. The following are a handful of steps drivers can take to ensure their tires are up to the task of fall road trips.

- Give tires the eye test. The eye test can be an effective and quick way to detect tire damage. Uneven wear may be indicative of insufficient tire pressure or an alignment problem. Uneven wear also may indicate the vehicle is experiencing problems with its steering or suspension.

ing or suspension. But many times uneven wear can be remedied by a simple tire rotation, so take your vehicle to your mechanic if you notice uneven wear.

- Look for stowaways. Uneven wear is not the only thing drivers can detect with their eyes. In the course of your travels, your tire might have picked up a few stowaways, such as nails and screws that are poking into the tire. If you find any free-loaders, take your car to your mechanic, as your tires may need to be replaced.
- Look for cracking or bulging treads. Cracking or bulging treads or sidewalls can eventually cause a blowout, which can

put you and your fellow road trippers in serious jeopardy. Cracked or bulging treads or sidewalls indicate tires are worn or weak, so bring your car to your mechanic for an inspection if you discover such problems.

- Perform the penny test. The penny test can help motorists determine if tire treads are worn. To perform the test, insert a penny with Abraham Lincoln's head pointing upward into the tread. If the tread does not reach the top of Lincoln's head, your tire's treads are worn.
- Check tire pressure. Right before you pack up the car to hit the open road, check each of your tires' pressure, making sure the pressure in each tire is

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at the level recommended in your owner's manual. Inflating tires to the proper pressure takes just a minute or so, but that minute can protect you and your passengers while also saving you money at the filling station. Properly maintained tires can go a long way toward ensuring the fall road trip season is a success.

Conserve Fuel With Vehicle Maintenance And Other Tips

The pinch at the pump is being felt by commuters, casual drivers and weekend warriors alike. Poor vehicle performance adversely affects fuel economy, so here's how to maintain a vehicle with an eye toward conserving fuel.

simply by using the recommended grade of motor oil. In addition, look for motor oils that list "Energy Conserving" on the label.

compromise combustion and impact performance. A fuel treatment product can clean out debris and dry up moisture to restore function and improve miles per gallon.

PROPER TIRE INFLATION

The U.S. Department of Energy says each decrease in tire pressure by 1 pound per square inch for four tires can decrease fuel economy by 0.2 percent. By keeping tires properly inflated, the average driver can improve gas mileage by as much as 3 percent. Drivers can consult their tire manufacturer's specifications for proper tire pressure.

CHANGE THE AIR FILTER
According to Auto Zone, an engine's ability to produce power is directly related to its ability to draw air in. A clean air filter assists with that function, whereas a dirty filter will reduce engine power and fuel efficiency.

USE THE AIR CONDITIONING SPARINGLY
The air conditioning unit in a vehicle uses power directly from the motor of the car. This means the vehicle consumes extra gas to keep the AC unit running, thereby reducing fuel efficiency.

GET A TUNE-UP
Additional mechanical issues may affect vehicle performance and lead to excessive fuel consumption. A mechanic can run diagnostics on the vehicle and make recommendations on things to repair or replace, such as spark plugs, ignition coils or faulty oxygen sensors.

REMOVE EXCESS CARGO
Clear the trunk or cargo area of extra items that can weigh down the vehicle, requiring more power to move it. Any heavy load will negatively affect mileage. Keeping a vehicle in top form can improve fuel economy, which can be especially beneficial in a time marked by soaring fuel costs.

USE RECOMMENDED MOTOR OIL
Engines require the right blend of products to work efficiently. The DOE says drivers can improve gas mileage by 1 to 2 percent

TREAT FUEL OCCASIONALLY
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What's Behind Noises Your Car Might Be Making

Few things can be as unsettling when behind the wheel as a sudden noise. Noises coming from a car can indicate a host of issues, and that's one reason why such sounds tend to be so different. Quickly identifying what's behind car noises can make for safer driving and potentially save drivers substantial amounts of money.

NOISE: RATTLING COINS

Problem: Loose lug nut in a hub cap
This noise can be loud and unsettling, but the good news is that it's often a simple fix if addressed immediately. The automotive insurance experts at Geico note that a noise that sounds like coins rattling around in a dryer is likely a loose lug nut in a hubcap. The lug nut might have become loose if a wheel was not tightened sufficiently after a recent maintenance appointment or even if drivers changed a tire on their own. The longer drivers wait to address this, the more dangerous and costly it could become, as it could have an effect on the wheel bearings. If addressed promptly, the damage is likely minimal.

NOISE: SQUEALING ON START-UP

Problem: Issue with the serpentine belt
A squealing noise at start-up is among the more annoying noises a driver can hear. This sound is often indicative of a worn or damaged serpentine belt, which connects the crankshaft to the alternator, power steering and additional components. Thankfully, a worn down serpentine belt is a relatively inexpensive repair, though it's important that it be addressed promptly. Squealing at start-up

also could indicate a loose tensioner, which is designed to keep the serpentine belt at a certain tightness and tension, or wear and tear to the belt due to parking outside. These issues can be addressed by readjusting or replacing the tensioner or replacing the serpentine belt, particularly if the part is old.

NOISE: ENGINE KNOCKING

Problem: Various issues
A knocking noise from the engine typically sounds like repeated tapping. The noise will often become louder as the vehicle accelerates. Various issues can be behind the knocking sound, and drivers should avoid self-diagnosing the problem, even if they've experienced it in the past with the same or a different vehicle. Some drivers hear knocking because they're using 87 octane fuel instead of the high-performance and more expensive fuel the owner's manual recommends (this could be a common problem in recent months given the meteoric rise in fuel prices). Another potential cause of engine knock could be problems with the pistons or crankshaft. Regardless of what's causing engine knocking, drivers are urged to take their vehicle to a mechanic promptly, as the cost of repairs is likely to rise the longer knocking goes untreated. No one wants to hear noises coming from their vehicles. However, such noises should be addressed promptly, as the quickness of drivers' responses could make the difference between a simple, less costly fix and a more time-consuming, expensive repair.

6 Reasons For A Check Engine Light

Modern vehicles utilize various technologies to ensure drivers remain as safe as possible behind the wheel. Technology also can alert drivers when their cars are in need of examination, and such is the case when the often dreaded "check engine" light comes on.

While a check engine indicator is seldom good news, it may not mean that expensive repairs are right around the corner. The following are six reasons why check engine lights come on and how to remedy these situations.

- 1. FAULTY/LOOSE GAS CAP:** A faulty gas cap is one of the reasons a check engine light might turn on. A cap that is not tightly closed or one that is poorly sealed enables vapors to escape, which can trigger the light. Opening the gas cap and then resealing it tightly may help; otherwise, a replacement cap may be necessary.
- 2. FAULTY SENSOR:** Sometimes there is nothing wrong with the engine or other components, but the light sensor itself. The check engine light might come on because its sensor is corroded or not working properly.
- 3. OXYGEN SENSOR FAILURE:** The oxygen sensor sends data to the vehicle's computer, which it uses to create the right mix of air and fuel to enter the engine's cylinders. The check engine light may come on when the sensor fails or registers a problem with the fuel/air mix.
- 4. IGNITION COILS/SPARK PLUGS:** A check engine light may come on to warn drivers it is time to replace spark plugs and/or ignition coils. Ignition coils generate the electricity needed for spark plugs to ignite the fuel and air mix in the cylinders. Worn coils or fouled plugs can cause any number of issues, including engine misfire.
- 5. CATALYTIC CONVERTER ISSUES:** The catalytic converter heats up hydrocarbons and other emissions so that they turn into carbon dioxide and water vapor to help protect the environment. The converter usually does not fail on its own, but a mechanic can help diagnose what might cause the failure.

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6. ELECTRONIC POWERTRAIN CONTROLS: Vehicles are large computerized devices with an array of sensors and modules that run powertrains. Any issues with these sensors, networks or modules can trigger the check engine light. Depending on the make and model of a vehicle, a check engine light may require less urgency than a flashing light. It always helps to consult with the owner's manual to help determine issues. Automotive mechanics can connect the car's computer to diagnostic equipment that will issue a diagnostic trouble code (DTC) that can serve as a starting point to address check engine light issues.

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