

On the Road to a Better Environment

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“Air pollution” usually evokes images of industrial smokestacks spewing clouds of dark smoke into the sky. You might be surprised to learn that cars and other vehicles are major contributors to air pollution nationwide, and in many cities they are the biggest contributors. Vehicle emissions contribute to urban smog, airborne toxins, and global warming.

The number one thing you can do to reduce air pollution is drive less. Combine several errands into one trip, walk, bike, car pool, and use public transportation. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, new technology has reduced the rate of emissions by 70 to 90 percent since the 1960s. However, even though technology enables automobile engineers to create “cleaner” cars and trucks, the environmental benefits are counteracted by the fact that today more drivers are on the road longer.

While automobiles are an indispensable part of modern life, you can reduce the amount of pollution emitted into the air, extend the life of your vehicle, and save money through proper car maintenance and good driving practices.

Make sure your vehicle runs in top condition. A tune-up can increase fuel efficiency by up to 8 percent, according to EPA Fact Sheet OMS-18. Following the manufacturer’s recommended maintenance guidelines for your vehicle not only will reduce emissions and enhance performance but also will increase resale value.

Regularly check and replace such parts as air filters and spark plugs. A dirty air filter increases fuel consumption; worn spark plugs cause poor starting, rough idling, and reduced gas mileage.

Be selective about the fluids you use in your vehicle. Energy conserving multigrade motor oil, for example, can improve mileage up to 1.5 percent. An EC-II rated oil can improve mileage by 2.7 percent. Look for “EC grade” on containers of energy-conserving grade motor oils.

Choose tires with the environment in mind. Radial tires get 5 percent greater mileage than bias tires in city driving and 10 percent in highway driving. Maintaining tire pressure at the higher end of the recommended range also tends to extend the mileage. Tires that last longer have to be replaced less often and so fewer tires end up in landfills.

Use automobile air conditioners only when necessary since they are another major cause of air pollution and the weight of the air conditioner alone reduces fuel efficiency.

Gauge your environmental consciousness with this checklist. Adapted from EPA Fact Sheet OMS-18

10 Ways to Reduce the Amount of Air Pollution Your Car Produces

1. Avoid unnecessary driving (i.e., walk, bike, use mass transit, carpool, combine trips).
2. Accelerate and decelerate smoothly in stop-and-go traffic.
3. Park your vehicle and go into a restaurant or bank, for example, instead of using the drive-through lane.
4. Turn your vehicle engine off if you expect to idle for more than 30 seconds (this will also save fuel).
5. Instead of using the air conditioner open a window or fresh air vent, or park in the shade.
6. Reduce engine overload: Turn off the air conditioner; avoid quick accelerations, high speeds, and steep grades; don't rev the engine or carry extra weight.
7. Minimize warm-up time in cold weather.
8. Avoid "topping off" your gas tank.
9. Avoid refueling on "ozone action days." If you must, refuel after dusk.
10. Keep your car tuned.

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