

Check your oil and tires in the spring

By Tara Marion

Preventative maintenance tasks, such as scheduled oil changes, are vital to the life of your car.

Although many specialists suggest checking your car's oil level every time you fill the gas tank, most people rely on their mechanics to do this when they have an oil change, which is recommended every three months or 3,000 miles, whichever comes first.

If you've ever wondered why you should change your oil after three months even though you haven't driven 3,000 miles, Bill Cain, senior vice president of Uncle Ed's Oil Shoppes, explains, "If you're just letting the car sit and then driving it on short trips, the short trips can cause moisture to collect in the engine and that can cause damage," he said.

If you don't have your car's oil changed according to these guidelines, "a lack of lubrication can cause internal engine damage," says Russ Smith, manager of vehicle services at Firestone Tire & Service Center, 5490 W. Main.

The detergent additives in the oil begin to break down, which prevents the oil from suspending dirt and foreign matter. "It would then begin to sludge and tarnish the engine surfaces," Cain explained.

With every oil change, you should also replace the oil filter.

As a car owner, you should familiarize yourself with the signs of oil seepage, most commonly indicated by brown spots on the ground underneath your car. Smith also cited an accumulation of grease and oil underneath the hood as a sign of oil seepage.

If you notice these problems, "you'd want to be checking your oil on a regular basis," Cain said.

To check the oil level, remove the dip stick and wipe it clean, reinsert the dipstick and remove it again. If the oil level isn't at or near the full mark, add oil.

Another indication of a low oil level is a lighted oil light, which indicates low oil pressure or a failure with the pump. "In any case, you should shut the car off immediately and check for the cause," Cain said.

Smith said most manufacturers recommend scheduled maintenance at 30,000-mile intervals. Cain explained why preventative maintenance is so important.

"You don't want to wait until things look bad, because then you've waited too long," he said. Aside from oil changes, two other crucial considerations for preventive care are tire rotations and alignments.

Tire rotations help lengthen the tread wear of your tires, which extends their life. Whether they're on the front or the back, tires wear differently.

"They're performing different jobs, so if you alternate the tires front to back, you can lengthen the tread wear," Cain said.

Smith explained the difference between the functions of your front and back tires. "The two front tires get cornering wear from turning. On the two rear tires, you would not experience that same wear."

Experts suggest rotating your tires twice a year, at every other oil change. "It helps to maximize the life of the tire and ensure directional control and stability for driving and handling," Smith explained.

Uneven tread wear indicates that the tires are misaligned or unbalanced. A shimmy or vibration in the steering wheel also indicates unbalanced tires.

“Misalignment would be a lack of directional control when you drive the car—maybe to the left or the right,” Smith said.

Added Cain, “cupping of the tread and uneven tread wear, such as the inside wearing faster than the outside and vice versa, would mean an alignment problem.” Dips in the tires and excessive noise from the tires also indicate cupping.

Keeping tires inflated to their proper pressure, however, can improve the tread wear of your tires. Tire pressure is measured with a tire gauge and recommended with every oil change.

Cain said the recommended tire pressure can be found on the sidewall of a tire and said it’s important to follow manufacturer’s recommendations on all service intervals.

“Following that, tread wear will generally be improved, as opposed to following the car manufacturer’s recommendations, because that typically is more for comfort than tread wear,” Cain concluded.