

# Get a fresh start on maintenance schedule this spring

By Tara Marion

Seasonal car maintenance is critical to the overall performance of an automobile. When you swap your sweaters and mittens for shirts and shorts this spring, use your wardrobe change as a reminder that your vehicles need extra attention this time of year.

Begin your spring car care with a thorough wash and wax; some car owners insist on doing by hand.

Although it is impossible to keep your car clean at all times, is important to keep it rinsed off. While salt melts the ice off slippery toads, it also eats away at your car's paint and finish.

If there are paint chips, touch them up as soon as possible.

"Most people won't sit outside in the wintertime and touch those up, so while they're giving it a good hand cleaning, they might as well just grab a little tube of touch-up paint," said Amy Schmidt, owner of Automotive Warehouse Group Inc., 1320 M-89 in Otsego.

If your car is exposed to a lot of sunlight, harsh soaps and dirt roads, you may want to wax your car again during the summer.

When the snow stops falling, remove your car's snow tires and winter windshield-wiper blades. Check your headlight and turn-signal bulbs, and you may want to replace your floor mats.

Check your filters and fluid levels, especially the antifreeze, so your car does not overheat in the summer. Switch from a de-icer windshield-wiper fluid to a regular one.

Clean your battery terminals and test the battery's integrity. "Batteries take a beating in the cold weather," said Dave Bernard, service adviser at Allegan Chrysler Plymouth Dodge, 1186 E. M-89 in Plainwell.

While many of these are do-it-yourself tasks, you must have a licensed professional check your air conditioning. "That's something you have to take it to a shop for," Schmidt said. "You can't mess with Freon."

While this may be an inconvenience, "you'll want to make sure the air conditioner is functioning properly for those hot summer days," Bernard added.

Warm weather goes hand in hand with summer vacations, so Schmidt suggested restocking your roadside hazard kit in preparation for any trips. Necessary items include flares and antenna flags, to help oncoming cars recognize those who are broken down), a first-aid kit, flashlight, travel tool kit, belts, hoses and duct tape.

"Duct tape fixes everything," Bernard said. "It can attach something like a hose to get you down the road." While a roadside hazard kit is important, limit its inventory to the bare essentials because it does take up space.

If storage space is a concern, trunk racks and enclosed cargo carriers add instant expansion. When drivers follow the manufacturer's weight-limit recommendations, these accessories are safe. Both Schmidt and Barnard agreed that qualified professionals should install these additions.

"If you try to do it yourself, chances are they're going to leak, and you won't have a warranty," Schmidt explained. "It's best to trust major changes to a professional, and then you have somebody who you know has experience to stand behind what they've done."

Installing a trunk rack or enclosed cargo carrier is like installing a sunroof. “You’re drilling holes and attaching stuff that’s going to be (taken) down the road at 70 mph, (so it must withstand) quite a wind force,” Barnard said.

When planning to put a lot of miles on a car during a vacation, have your tires aligned, rotated and inflated according to your owner’s manual.

Have your brakes inspected in the spring. Because of likely salt buildup from this past winter, have somebody take them apart, brush out the salt and test them.

Although cars are built to run in all weather conditions, Barnard said spring/summer maintenance is still important—and “car trouble is the last thing you want on a vacation.” If you’re going out of town on a long trip, make sure everything is functioning properly.

“If you don’t keep up with your car, your car’s not going to keep up with you,” Schmidt concluded.