

Preventative maintenance saves time and trouble

By Tara Marion

Mechanical problems with your car often result from neglect, but preventative maintenance can minimize mechanical failures and keep your car up to speed with your lifestyle.

Although you should consult your owner's manual when performing some tasks on your vehicle, here are some suggestions for maintaining your car's peak performance.

Specialists recommend a tune up every 35,000 to 40,000 miles, which includes several components, depending on your vehicle, particularly the sparkplugs, distributor cap, rotor, gas filter, smog filter and air filter.

The mechanic should also scope your car and clean the battery cables. "If you don't get a tune up, your engine will reach a point where it will not run, will run rough or the fuel economy will be jeopardized," said Bill Steffler, service manager at M&M Motor Mall, 3825 Lake St.

Belts and hoses should be checked at every oil change, but Ron Penny, owner of Woodward's Garage, 201 E. Alcott, explained when you need to replace them. "Usually when they get about 70,000 miles on them you have to start thinking about changing them."

Agreed Steffler, "Belts and hoses are usually changed on an as-needed basis, but a good rule of thumb is that if the same belts are on the vehicle for four years, change them for preventative maintenance reasons."

Worn, glazed or frayed belts and bulging, rotten or brittle hoses need to be replaced.

Like belts and hoses, you should replace your car's brakes on an as-needed basis. "No two drivers are alike, so it just depends on how they stop and whether they drive in town or on the highway," Steffler said.

Brakes should be inspected and cleaned every 30,000 miles, as Penny explained, "Rear drum brakes get dust and things in them and if you don't get them cleaned out and adjusted, the rear ones will lock up on you and get damp."

Many experts believe a clean engine offers better cooling in the summer and easier starting in the winter, although Steffler and Penny disagreed on the benefits of this practice.

"The belts, hoses and the rubber products under the hood will last longer if you keep them clean," Steffler said.

He said another potential benefit of a clean engine is that it increases the value of your car. "Through the life of your car, at the end when you're trading it or selling it to someone else, a kept-clean engine is easier to have cleaned, instead of trying to do it after 100,000 miles.

Penny commented, "One reason not to recommend cleaning the engine is there are too many electronic components on them that may get messed up if they get wet."

Many components of preventative car care maintenance are easily done by the driver. Steffler said most manufacturers recommend checking the vital fluids under the hood (power steering fluid, oil and windshield wiper fluid) when filling the car with gas.

Most people rely on oil and filter changes for this, but if you actually read an owner's manual, it says to check the vital fluids every time you're filling up the gas tank," Steffler explained.

Light inspections are a crucial maintenance item for your car and the safety of other drivers.

“Drivers should make sure their lights are clean and working. The headlights, parking lights, turn signals and back-up lights should be inspected on a weekly or a fill-up basis. This is safer and more courteous to other motorists, so they can see what you’re trying to do as you are turning, stopping or braking,” Steffler concluded.