



Car Health Checklist

A few regular checks avoid a whole lot of problems. Ever thought what might happen if something failed on your car? The consequences could be severe, so it's vital that you keep it well maintained at all times. Checks are easy, but if you're not confident, let a garage do the work.

EVERY WEEK

CHECK THE CONDITION OF YOUR TYRES

Study the tyre's sidewalls. This is the area visible on the side of the tyres. If there is any damage to the tyre beyond light scratching (such as cuts, gashes or bulges), ask a garage to inspect it. Check the tread depth along the area of the tyre that comes into contact with the road. Use a tread depth gauge to check that there is at least 1.6mm across the central three-quarters all the way round the tyre. Without it, your car is illegal. You will also compromise your safety and those of others, because your car won't handle at its best and its stopping distances will be dramatically increased.

CHECK YOUR TYRE PRESSURES

Do this when your tyres are cold and the car is on a level surface. Garage forecourt air lines are convenient, but aren't always accurate, so cross-check the pressures with your own pressure gauge. Also remember that the journey to your garage could heat up the tyres which could give an inaccurate reading, so let them cool before you do your checks.

EVERY FORTNIGHT

CHECK YOUR ENGINE OIL

Switch off the engine and leave the car to cool for at least 10 minutes. Locate the dipstick, remove it and wipe it clean with a tissue. Put it back in the engine, wait a moment, then remove it again and check the level. A satisfactory level of oil will be somewhere between the two marks near the end of the dipstick, but ideally should be nearer the top (maximum) mark. If you need to top up the oil, you must locate the oil filler cap, which is separate from the dipstick. Check that you have the right grade of oil for your engine – this information will be in your car's handbook, or available from most oil stockists. Pour in small amounts of oil, checking the level carefully until it is correct. Never overfill it, and try not to spill any on the engine as it will burn when the engine gets hot.

EVERY MONTH

CHECK YOUR BRAKE FLUID

First, find the brake fluid reservoir – your handbook will tell you where it is (usually behind the engine, to the left or right). Identify the maximum and minimum marks on the reservoir (or sometimes a dipstick under the lid) and check your fluid level. If the fluid is slightly below the minimum level, top it up by pouring brake fluid in up to the correct level. Always use the correct fluid and never get any on your hands or the car's paintwork – it's highly corrosive. If you discover that the fluid level is significantly below the minimum level, do not attempt to drive the car, as your brakes could completely fail without warning.

CHECK ENGINE COOLANT LEVELS

Find the plastic radiator expansion tank – this is where you'll top up your coolant. When the car is cold, locate the maximum and minimum marks and check your coolant level. If it needs topping up, slowly remove the cap (remember – only do this when the car is cold!) and fill the tank to the maximum level with engine coolant. Don't use tap water, as coolant includes anti-freeze, which stops the water expanding in winter and causing damage. If your car requires regular top-ups, it almost certainly means there is a leak somewhere or another engine problem. Take your car to a garage to get this fixed.

CHECK YOUR WASHER FLUID LEVELS AND WINDSCREEN WIPERS

Locate the water container for the windscreen washer jets. There is no need to be precise with fluid levels here – just fill the tank with screen wash. Again, don't use tap water, as screen wash includes additives to prevent freezing in winter and help clean the windscreen better. If your wiper blades have any splits or tears on them, or if they leave streaks on your screen, buy new wiper blades. It's easier to replace the whole head, rather than just the rubber.

CHECK YOUR LIGHTS

There are a few things you need to do to ensure your lights are operating correctly. Firstly, make sure they are all clean. Next, check none of the bulbs have blown by switching on the headlights (both dipped and main beam) and hazard lights. After checking lights at the front and rear of the vehicle are working correctly check the brake lights by using a reflective surface behind the car or someone else to help you. Lastly, check there are no cracks in the lenses, or any water inside the lamp units. Either can cause problems, and could mean your car would fail an MOT.