

THE WINTER CHECKUP

Special section!

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Tips for winterizing your car

It's that time of year again. Temperatures and wind chills that can take your breath away. Snow and ice that make stepping outside a dangerous proposition. You know all too well how winter affects you. It is important to take a moment to think about how it affects your car as well. After all, you don't want to be stranded in those sub-zero temperatures.

If you live where it snows, you know the damage that snow, ice, loose gravel and salt can do to your car. Minor scratches and nicks turn to rust, your heater gets a workout it may not be prepared for, and your windshield must deal with the temperature stress of a warm interior and a freezing exterior. Here are some maintenance tips for winterizing your car:

Windshield Safety

Thermal shock is the term engineers use to describe the stress caused by drastic differences in outdoor and indoor temperatures. If you have a small ding in your windshield, thermal shock can cause your minor ding to turn into a major crack.

Repairing a small ding costs as little as \$50 to \$60. Replacing a cracked windshield can cost hundreds of dollars; on some cars, the cost may be even higher. Once a ding or star (star-shaped with points spreading out) expands, windshield replacement is often the only option.

If the damage is reported quickly, the odds are much improved that a windshield repair company can save the windshield. "It is important to perform the repair before dirt infiltrates into the break. If you can't get into a repair shop immediately, call to see if you can get a temporary break patch. These patches cover the break until it can be repaired and do not obscure your vision."

To attain optimum consumer safety, it is recommended repairing a windshield whenever possible, instead of replacing it. Repair not only saves the windshield it preserves the factory's seal of windshield to auto body. Since passenger side air bags deploy off the windshield, preserving the factory installation is an important safety consideration. Keeping the factory's original adhesive set also helps avoid air and water leaks."

Fluids

As any mechanic will tell you, checking fluids is the least expensive and easiest preventive maintenance you can do. Change your oil frequently (consult your owner's manual for recommended frequency), and don't forget to change your engine coolant (diluted with 50 percent water) and transmission fluid, about every two years. Pure engine coolants can freeze at zero degrees, but mixing with water prevents freezing and provides great protection for the cold weather.

Though fluids like oil and transmission are commonly checked, other fluids integral to your vehicle's performance, may go unnoticed. Power steering, brake, radiator and battery fluids also should be filled to recommended levels.

Don't forget to top off windshield washer fluid. If you've ever driven after salt trucks have come through to melt snow and ice, you know the importance of windshield washer fluid. Do not dilute washer fluid with water since it can freeze during winter's harsh temperatures. While you're at it, you might want to change the wiper blades to prevent poor vision in already poor driving conditions.

Batteries and Corroded Cables

Winter mornings can wreak havoc on an older battery. The average life of a battery is 3 1/2 years. If your battery is older than that, it's probably time to replace. Have a mechanic check the battery and cables to ensure your car starts quickly and reliably.

Anything Made of Rubber

Worn, bald or badly aligned or balanced tires can mean accidents on ice, rain or snow. Have your tires checked for proper inflation and alignment, and rotate them about every 6,000 miles. If you live in unusually snowy areas, you may want to consider snow tires for added traction, or keep chains in your trunk or garage to help you through heavy snowfall.

Rubber parts under your hood need maintenance, too. Radiator, heater and vacuum hoses, among others, should be checked for cracks and bulges.

Also, inspect all belts for damages and splits.

Rust, Minor Scratches and Nicks

Road salt can turn a slight scratch or nick to an ugly rust spot that's impossible to avoid. And it can spread. Avoid costly body work by restoring spots before they turn into larger problems.

Boots

Front-wheel drive vehicles equipped with CV (constant velocity) joints should have the boots checked for rips and cracks. Boots protect CV joints, but when the joints are exposed to salt, ice and snow, they can damage the joint. Replacing a joint can cost hundreds of dollars, but replacing a boot costs a small fraction of that.

Spark Plugs

Worn or misfiring spark plugs can affect how efficiently a vehicle burns the fuel/air mixture, ultimately affecting engine performance. Worn spark plugs waste gas and increase exhaust emissions, so have them checked and replaced often.

Brakes

Don't postpone needed brake work. It's dangerous to drive with poorly performing brakes, especially in snowy weather. Postponing brake service also can cause the cost of overhauling your brake system to skyrocket.

Lights

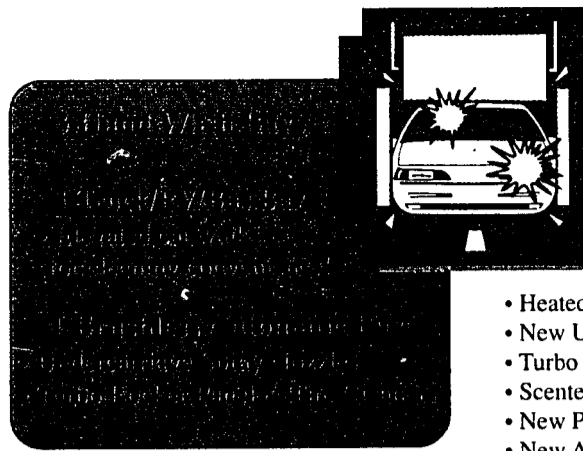
Last, but not least, check your lights. Accidents can occur if you can't see where you're driving, or if other drivers can't see you, especially as we approach winter's short days and long nights.

Maintain your vehicle regularly to provide years of service with better performance and safety.

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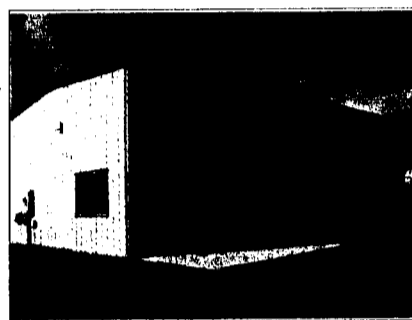
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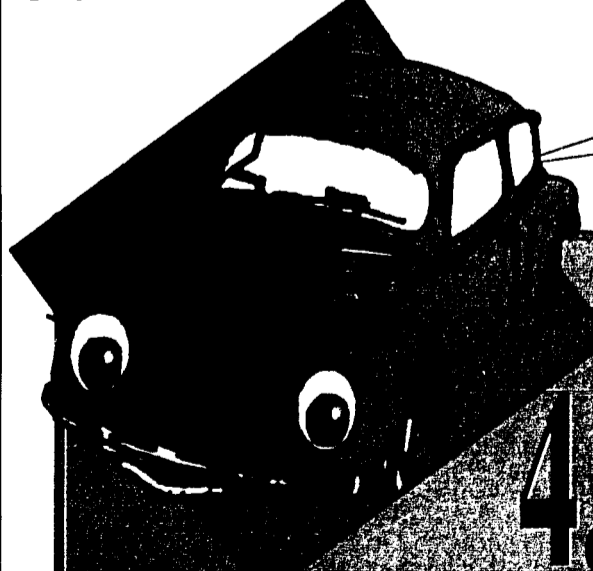
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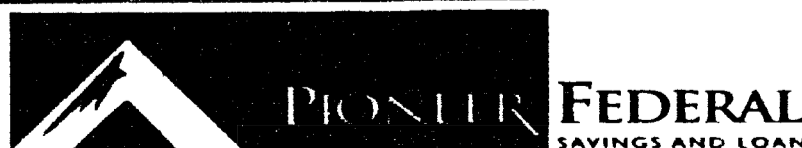
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