How to Follow a Seasonal Car Maintenance Checklist All Year

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Turn your owner's manual into a monthly routine that keeps a daily driver out of the shop, saves money, and catches small problems before they become tows.

Things you will need

- Owner's manual or a printed service schedule card
- Digital tire-pressure gauge you can read in low light
- Tread-depth gauge in 32nds of an inch
- Coolant refractometer with temperature compensation
- Four-band brake-fluid moisture tester pen
- Battery terminal brush and nitrile gloves
- Small optical inspection mirror and a LED flashlight
- Adjustable torque wrench for wheel fasteners
- Quality funnel set with a fine strainer
- Oil drain pan with a screw-top pour spout
- Sealed original jugs for used oil and coolant
- Ice scraper, small shovel, and a booster pack
- Wool blanket, work gloves, and a paper road map
- Fresh washer fluid rated below your local winter low

Set Your Baseline From the Owner's Manual

1. **Find the Maintenance Schedule and Both Columns**
   Open the owner's manual to the maintenance schedule section, usually near the back, and read both columns before you do anything else.
2. **Start a Service Log With Date and Mileage**
   Buy a small pocket notebook or make a spreadsheet tab and record every service in one line: date, odometer reading, work done, the fluid or part brand and grade you used, and labor cost if you paid a shop.
3. **Photograph the Door-Jamb Placard and Caps**
   On the driver's door jamb is a small placard with the cold tire pressure your car was engineered around, along with the maximum loaded weight.
4. **Match Fluid Specs Before Buying Anything**
   Write the three specs on a card in the glovebox: engine-oil viscosity and service rating, coolant chemistry, and brake-fluid DOT grade.
5. **Pick a Fixed Monthly Walk-Around Day**
   Choose a day you can repeat for a year: the first Sunday, payday Friday, or the morning you take the trash out.

Do a 15-Minute Monthly Walk-Around

6. **Check Tire Pressure Cold Against Placard**
   Do this first thing in the morning, before the sun has warmed the tires and before you have driven

more than about a mile.

7. **Measure Tread Depth With a Gauge**

   A cheap digital tread gauge reads in thirty-seconds of an inch at four points across each tire.

8. **Walk Around for Fresh Leaks or Damage**

   Slide a piece of clean cardboard under the engine and one under each wheel on your parking spot overnight, then read it in the morning.

9. **Top Up Washer Fluid and Check Wipers**

   Fill the washer reservoir with a fluid rated below your local winter low, not plain water, since water can burst the lines and freeze the pump in the first hard cold snap.

10. **Test Every Bulb Including Brake and Reverse**

    Cycle through every light once a month: low beams, high beams, front and rear fog lamps if fitted, both turn signals, brake lights, tail lamps, reverse lamps, the license-plate lamp, and the interior dome.

Rotate Tires and Refresh Wear Items Seasonally

11. **Rotate Tires Every Five to Eight Thousand Miles**

    Rotation evens out the wear pattern front-drive cars put on the front axle and extends usable tread life noticeably.

12. **Watch for Alignment Symptoms on a Straight Road**

    On a smooth, empty, straight road at about 40 miles per hour, briefly release the wheel.

13. **Replace Engine Air Filter and Cabin Filter**

    Pop the engine air-filter housing clips and lift the element out.

14. **Squeeze Coolant Hoses and Inspect the Belt**

    With the engine cold, squeeze the upper and lower radiator hoses along their length.

15. **Diagnose a Serpentine Squeal Before It Strands You**

    A brief squeal at startup on a damp morning is usually a belt slipping on a wet pulley and is not an emergency.

Test Fluids and Handle the Season Changeover

16. **Change Oil and Filter by Mileage or Time**

    Modern engines have two limits, and you hit whichever comes first.

17. **Test Coolant With a Refractometer Each Autumn**

    Coolant is a mixture of antifreeze concentrate and water; a 50/50 blend is the common starting point, and the exact target is on the label and in your manual.

18. **Test Brake Fluid Moisture and Plan a Flush**

    Brake fluid is hygroscopic: it pulls moisture from the air through microscopic passages in the hoses and reservoir.

19. **Clean Battery Terminals and Load-Test Yearly**

    Pop the plastic boot off each terminal.

20. **Prep for Winter Freeze and Summer Heat**

    Before the first hard freeze, confirm washer fluid and coolant are rated below your local record low, top up the fuel tank so the line does not ice up, and pack a winter kit with an ice scraper, small

shovel, jumper cables or a booster pack, warm gloves, a wool blanket, flashlight, and a paper road map.

Sources

1. Standards and Specifications for Motor Vehicles and Fluids
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7. Motor Oil, Coolant, and Brake Fluid Reference Articles
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Written as a checklist from https://www.howcompass.com/how-to/Follow-a-Seasonal-Car-Maintenance-Checklist. Corrections: https://www.howc