

Top Tips for Improving Your Fuel Economy

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Fill up with a lower-octane gasoline. Buy the lowest grade or octane of gasoline that is appropriate for your car. That pricey premium fuel won't boost your car's fuel economy or performance in the least. Check your manual.

Don't top off. Don't bother topping off when filling your car's gas tank. Any additional gas is just going to slop around or seep out. Stop pumping at the first indication that your tank is full when the automatic nozzle clicks off.

Tighten up that gas cap. Gas will evaporate from your car's gas tank if it has an escape. Loose, missing or damaged gas caps cause 147 million gallons of gas to evaporate each year, according to the Car Care Council.

Go for the shade. The hot summer sun that makes the inside of your car feel like a sauna also zaps fuel from your gas tank.

"If you let your car bake in the sun there's going to be a greater amount of evaporative emissions that take place than if you park in the shade," says Jim Kliesch, research associate at the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy and vehicle analyst for GreenerCars.com.

Use your garage for your car. Got a garage? Clear it out and make room for your car. Parking in your garage will help your car stay warm in winter and cool in summer, and you won't have to depend as much on your gas-guzzling air-conditioning or defroster when you drive.

Pump up your tires. Don't get caught driving on underinflated tires. Underinflated tires wear down more quickly and they also lower your car's gas mileage. Driving on underinflated tires may also reduce the life of your tires by 15 percent or more.

Check your tire pressure once a month. Buy a digital gauge and keep it in your glove box. Compare the pressure in your tires with the recommended pressure listed in your owner's manual and on the placard in your car door. Then inflate your tires as needed. Be sure to check tire pressure when your tires are cold. A good time is early in the morning after your car's been idle overnight.

Keep your engine in tune. Fixing a car that is out of tune or has failed an emissions test can boost gas mileage by about 4 percent. So be sure to give your car regular tune-ups. You'll also want to watch out for worn spark plugs. A misfiring spark plug can reduce a car's fuel efficiency by as much as 30 percent.

Replace air filters. Keep a close eye on your engine's air filter. When the engine air filter clogs with dirt, dust and bugs, it causes your engine to work harder and your car becomes less fuel-efficient. Replacing a clogged air filter could improve your gas mileage by as much as 10 percent and save you 15 cents a gallon. It's a good idea to have your engine air filter checked at each oil change. The Car Care Council recommends changing your car's air and oil filters every three months or 3,000 miles or as specified in your owner's manual.

Use the right oil. You can improve your car's gas mileage by 1 percent to 2 percent by using the manufacturer's recommended grade of motor oil. Opt for motor oil with the words "energy conserving" on the API performance label. This oil contains friction-reducing additives.

Don't skimp on maintenance. Be serious about auto care. Your car's performance depends on it.

Take a Load Off

Heavier vehicles require more energy to move, so carrying around excess weight will also affect your mileage. Empty out your trunk (or even your backseat) of unnecessary items. An extra 100 pounds in the trunk will reduce your fuel economy by 1 to 2 percent in the typical vehicle.

If you have a roof rack or roof carrier, install it on your vehicle only when absolutely necessary. Not only does the carrier add extra weight, but it also increases the aerodynamic drag on the vehicle, which further contributes to a loss of fuel economy.

Don't Drive Aggressively

Give yourself extra time to get to your destination and think "steady and smooth" as you drive. On surface streets, driving at the speed limit will give you mostly green lights, which improves your gas mileage as well as reduces the wear on your brakes. On the highway, the DOE says that every 5 mph you drive over 65 mph represents a 7-percent decrease in fuel economy.

Use the Highest Gear Possible

Cars are designed to start in the lowest gear possible because that's where they have the most power, but that power translates to an increase in fuel consumption.

To improve your fuel economy, drive in the highest gear possible when you are cruising at a steady speed, such as on the highway. If your vehicle has an automatic transmission with a "sport" mode, it's most likely that this is a computer program designed to shift later (and therefore keep you in a lower gear longer). While this gives you greater performance, driving in "sport" mode will also decrease your fuel economy.

Use Cruise Control — Selectively

Using cruise control can improve your gas mileage by helping you maintain a steady speed, but only if you are driving on mostly flat roads. If you are driving in hilly terrain, using cruise control typically causes your vehicle to speed up faster (to maintain the preset speed) than it would if you were operating the accelerator yourself. Before you push that cruise control button, think about the terrain ahead.

Think Clean

Keeping your car washed and waxed improves aerodynamics and therefore affects fuel economy. Engineer Tom Wagner, Jr. reported to Stretcher.com (as in stretching your dollars) a 7-percent improvement in fuel economy, from 15 to 16 mpg, during a 1,600-mile road trip.

Avoid Excessive Idling

When a car is idling, it is using fuel, yet not going anywhere. This translates to 0 mpg. When you leave your car running while you are waiting in line at the drive-thru, or as you wait outside your kids' school, you are wasting fuel. It is more efficient to turn the engine off while you wait and then restart the car. If that's not practical (like in the line at McDonald's), then park the car and go inside instead.

Combine Your Errands

A little planning can make a big difference in fuel economy. When your engine is cold, it uses more fuel than when it is warm. Combining errands can improve your gas mileage because your engine will be warm for more of the trip. It might also mean you travel less total miles. According to the DOE, several short trips all begun with a cold start can use twice as much fuel as a single, longer trip that covers the same distance.

Use the air vents instead of windows.

Driving with open windows increase the drag on your car due to wind. This means the car will have to expend more power in order to move forward, and thus resulting in increased fuel consumption. Also avoid using the air conditioner if possible as this will also mean more fuel consumed.

Avoid warming up your car excessively.

Warming up your car in the morning means that you are using fuel to travel a grand total of 0 miles, and in the meantime also unnecessarily polluting the air around you.

Avoid using your car unnecessarily.

Driving with a cold engine can increase the amount of fuel consumed by as much as 60-70%, so try to make every trip count.