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Cars are very significant investments - and, unfortunately, investments mostly doomed to depreciation. They can also embody the image that we want to show to friends, co-workers, and other drivers. Keeping your car looking new keeps its resale value up, makes it last longer, and helps avoid more costly headaches in the future. A car that looks good on the outside leaves a good impression, and helps you get the most money when you sell it three or five or more years down the road. Here are some useful tips that will help you keep your car looking new:

Keep a proper following distance, and keep to the right. Also keep your speed down on roads with loose stones or other material on the surface. Give larger trucks and vehicles with more exposed wheels an especially wide berth.

Choose your parking spots carefully, Avoid parallel parking if possible, and only use lots with angled spots or wide straight-in spots. Steer clear of "compact only" spots, as they don't leave enough room for driver error. Park near cars that are a few years old and in perfect condition, or park near special-interest or classic cars. Watch out for newer cars that already have a lot of minor dings and scratches, and of course watch out for the beaters. Avoid parallel parking on an abruptly sloped street if at all possible. One other tip that might be of use: If you're parking in a grocery store lot that has a slope, park at the highest point.

Park out of the sun, prolonged exposure to the sun weakens the finish and invites scalloping, peeling, and fading; and it makes the paint more vulnerable to scratching and chipping.

While loading your vehicle, don't rest items on the hood, roof, or trunk. It may be a lot easier to scratch your vehicle's finish than you think just from setting items down. You also risk driving with the item sliding off your car, leaving scrape marks. If possible, set items elsewhere when loading.

Wash your car frequently. Remove road grime and corrosion-causing acid-rain deposits with frequent hand washes. Pay special attention to fresh tar and pine sap. Both will over time bake into the finish.

For removing tar before you wash, try applying a small amount of cooking oil with a cotton towel, or soft, clean shop rag, or leaving a dab of petroleum jelly on the area for a few hours, then wiping gently away. For tree sap, very gently apply a small amount of mineral spirits before washing. Better yet, there are special solutions for removing these substances available at auto parts stores and department stores. When washing, remember to use proper soap for car washing and rinse from the top down.

Use high-quality towels to dry your car, cheap, coarse towels with nylon binding around the edges - or exposed labels - will scour the surface and leave scratches. After clearing most of the water with a chamois, terry cloth towels with a high thread count (otherwise termed "microfiber") are the best to use for drying after a wash. Most detailing experts now recommend that you dry your car's surface with an up-down or side-to-side motion, rather than with circular swirls.

Avoid automatic car washes. They can damage your car's finish in several different ways. Harsh, heavy scrubbers can dent panels, and brushes can scour the finish by grinding in grit and grime. So-called "touchless" car washes don't damage the finish, but they likely won't get all of the deposits off, leaving them to be baked on by the sun. For keeping salt off in winter, touchless automatic washes and their undercarriage flushes (some more effective than others) are a stop-gap solution, but not a replacement for a good, thorough hand-wash.

Wax occasionally, At least twice a year - or more often for unusually harsh conditions - give your car a good wax coat. It not only adds some shine, but it also helps supplement your car's finish with added protection from sunlight, acid rain, small stone chips, and bird droppings.

Protective measures, Most new cars now come from the factory with an anti-chip coating applied to the rocker panels and lower section of the doors. If your car doesn't, some specialized shops can apply a mostly transparent, protective coating to the lower section of your doors that will also help prevent rust. Also, if side moulding doesn't already stop passengers from opening doors into building walls, other vehicles, or signposts, consider installing the special plastic stripping around the edges of your doors. It's not pretty but its function is irrefutable and it will keep your car prettier in the long run.

Fix damage or rust promptly. Chips or scrapes, no matter how minor, make your finish much more susceptible to rust. Inspect your entire vehicle each season for new corrosion and fix it.

You see that first patch of rust on your car and get a sinking feeling. What do you do now? Is there hope, or is your car doomed to a slow, undignified death?

Every auto-body expert agrees on the course of action: Remove it! Now! The longer you let rust stay, the more complicated and costly it becomes to fix.

Rust repair, and body work in general is simple in concept but tedious, and it is very difficult to yield professional-looking results without proper training and equipment. Unless you're hard set on doing it yourself, it's probably best that you let a pro do the job right. The rust-removal job consists of three basic steps:

Grinding off the existing rust and smoothing the surfaces, priming the bare metal, and applying a new coat of paint.

Of course, the best course of action against rust is to prevent it in the first place, or, if you've already fixed some on your car, preventing more rust from forming. There are a number of useful precautions that you can take against rust:

Move to a warm, dry climate! This isn't always the most practical solution, but you can apply this idea to where you store your car. The best place to store cars is in a warm, well-ventilated garage. If your garage tends to be tight and damp, you're better off storing the car outside.

Keep your car away from road salt. Those most at risk for rust live in the appropriately named "rust belt" region, which stretches roughly from the plains states through the Great Lakes to upstate New York. Salt accelerates the electrochemical reaction that forms rust (ferric oxide).

Wash your car frequently. Wash the exterior and undercarriage of your car at least once every two weeks, especially in the winter months, and hand wax your car's finish with a high-quality product at least twice a year.

Check drainage holes. Most cars have drainage holes at the bottom of the doors and rocker panels. If the holes become clogged with debris excess moisture can get trapped on the inside and lead to premature rusting.

Protect your car's vulnerable spots. Many models have particular areas that are prone to premature rusting. Look around on the road at other cars of the same model and near the same model year and see what area of the body tends to rust first. Pay special attention to that area of your car's body. Keep it clean and check for moisture build up.

Remember, the best thing to do about rust is to prevent it from forming in the first place. Preventative maintenance applies to the body as well as the mechanicals. That means keeping your car away from moisture and salt, and keeping it clean. And when you do see even a bit of rust, fix it now!

Lubricate your locks and hinges. Consult with your owner's manual and use a graphite lubricant on your locks if recommended. Applying a small amount of petroleum-based lubricant to door and trunk hinges might also silence any creaking that started during winter.

Inspect your weather-stripping. Get any that looks mildewy, cracked, or brittle replaced right away. According to advice from the International Carwash Association, spraying weather-stripping with silicone spray will ensure that the water will bead away.

Inspect your car's underbody for rust and winter damage. If there are any suspicious areas, have a mechanic look at them, and fix them immediately if needed. Pay special attention to brake components (sticky calipers, corroded brake lines), and exhaust components (rusted clamps, crumbling tailpipes, holes forming in muffler) that might have salt or slush damage. Suspension and steering pieces such as bushings, strut mounts, springs, and tie rods are also susceptible to winter damage.

Cleaning car upholstery, Anybody who has ever owned a car has probably managed to spill something on their upholstery. Kids with runny ice-creams, dogs shedding hairs, or a carelessly placed curry in the passenger seat are all hazards. Especially on longer trips, when eating and drinking in the car becomes the rule rather than the exception, stuff gets spilled.

A dirty car-seat isn't necessarily only a cosmetic thing: The surface of car upholstries has folds and crevices in which crumbs and dirt can accumulate over time. When moving around in the car seat - and especially when getting in and out of the car - these particles may work much in the same way as sand-paper does, which causes the seats to wear faster. This, in turn, may cause a drop in value of the vehicle.

Top tips for cleaning car upholstery

First, Hoover the carpets and upholstery as well as you can. If possible, use a small, powerful vacuum cleaner built for cleaning your house. "Dust busters" and other hand-held vacuums are normally not strong enough, and the Hoovers that are available outside of service stations are frequently full, dirty, or lack suction. If you don't have a small Hoover, it may be worth investing in one - it will come in handy around the house as well. Get one that has more than 1000 watts of power, and you should be all right.

After hoovering, a clear glass cleaner can get most dry dirt and granular stains (earth stains, smeared food) out of upholstery. Glass cleaner?, we hear you cry. Well, yes, actually: Glass cleaners have great cleaning characteristics, and will not leave soap and grease themselves: Many other cleaners will get rid of the dry dirt, but then leave you with a wet stain and soapy residue that is left in the car seats. Make sure you do not get one of the blue cleaners, however, as the dye in these may leave stains themselves.

Most "wet stains" be removed from most types of fabric with a liquid and salt: Dilute the stain with some water, and cover the stain with salt. The salt will pull the humidity out of the seat, and it will take the stain with it. Repeat as necessary. If water does not do the trick to dissolve the stain, hairspray or paint thinner (try on an inconspicuous part of your upholstery first, of course, to make sure the chemicals do not cause more damage than the stain itself) with a layer of salt on top may do the trick. For particularly stubborn stains, try a solution of vinegar and dishwashing liquid in a bucket of water.

If someone is carsick inside the car, obviously remove the sick as soon as possible, but also neutralise the stain with baking soda and water as soon as possible: Vomit can be very acidic, and the acid may cause some serious grief and discolouring of the upholstery.

Blood stains can be removed from upholstery and carpets by dissolving the stains with some water, and pouring laundry detergent over the wet stain. Rub gently, and watch the stains disappear. Remember to clean the upholstery normally afterward: you do not want the soapy and possibly allergy-inducing detergent to cause problems later.

If all else fails, we have to bring out the big guns: rent a steam-cleaner from your local machine-rental shop, and clean your interior according to the cleaning manufacturer's instructions.

Maintenance Tips, so you're going to have a new driver in the family. Standard driver's ed courses may have already taught your son or daughter the basics of how to drive, but they seldom teach teens what they really need to know to keep a car running right, so as to avoid costly repairs and keep safe from roadside breakdowns and other mishaps.

Trouble is, many young drivers don't know - or even care - how a car works, or what they need to do to keep it working. There are some, admittedly, who are real gear heads, but most teens have other concerns, like clubs, sports, or their image to the opposite sex. They may be fascinated with the car as a symbol of independence, and as an appliance, but that's it. They get in, turn the key, and it goes. How do you enforce the importance of proper maintenance? As we cover below, helping to educate them is a big start to success.

In the interest of your son or daughter's happiness and safety - and your wallet - do the following before you even let them take to the roads:

Show them the basics underhood, This doesn't have to be complicated. Show your son or daughter around the hood. Show them where the engine is, the alternator, the battery, the transmission, the radiator. If you don't know where everything is, your mechanic will probably be glad to show both of you. Follow up by showing where the items that need the most frequent attention are, like the oil dipstick and filler, the coolant reservoir, and the washer fluid bottle.

Check the spare, Teens tend to drive older vehicles in general, and the condition of the spare is important. Make sure the spare tire in their car has air in it. It's something that's almost always completely overlooked." It may be completely deflated or unusable, or missing altogether. If it's an older car that was bought used, make sure the spare is there, along the jack, and test the jack to make sure it's the correct one and fits the car at the right jacking point.

Set the emergency kit, You should have an emergency toolkit and a first-aid kit in your car, no matter how old the car is or if you only drive around town. Make sure your teen driver knows where the kit is and what's inside. It should include flares, emergency triangles, and a blanket.

Get the paperwork in order, "Make sure they have the proper insurance papers and registration in the vehicle, that they know where they are, and that they're updated.

Young people tend to get involved in more minor fender-benders, too, and it only complicates matters," advised Baker.

Being able to present the proper documents can help reduce the chances of headaches later on when it comes time to make a claim. Tape a cheat sheet inside the glove box door for your son or daughter, with who to call, what to say, and what to present.

Give them a cell phone for emergencies, or at least keep a cell phone in the car, but make them promise never to use it while driving. Finally, remind your teen driver about distraction. Inexperience more than cancels out any advantage that the new driver might have in reaction time. Strictly ban them from driving while talking on the cell phone, eating, or drinking. Also place limits on friends who can ride along.

Now that your new driver is familiar with the car, they'll need to know what to do, and how often. "We don't want them to become a hazard on the road when normal maintenance could have avoided it," Here are some maintenance concerns that should be addressed on a regular basis:

Check the oil, many teen drivers make it out on the road with no idea how to check the oil, let alone that they should check it at every other fill-up. Some don't even wonder about it until the low oil light flickers and damage has already been done. Make sure they know how to read the dipstick, that the engine needs to be off, and that the car should be parked on level ground. Go over the procedure on what kind of oil to add and how, being careful not to add too much.

Check the tires, Inspect the tread for wear, embedded objects, cracking, or exposed belt material. Check the pressure every other time you fill up with fuel. Consult with the pressures on the inside of the driver's doorsill or inside the fuel filler door.

Battery, A dying battery will likely fail on one of the coldest or hottest days, especially if a battery is more than a couple of years old, check frequently for a build up of corrosion. Beware that some batteries still require checking the level and adding water as necessary.

Coolant, When you have the hood open, show your son or daughter where the coolant reservoir bottle is, and make sure it's in the acceptable range. It's an easy check, so emphasize that failing to check and maintain the cooling system will leave you stranded on the side of the road sooner or later, probably at the least convenient time. Plus, overheats are costly and hazardous to the safety of the driver and other motorists.

Check all the lights. An easy thing for teens to check on their own. For checking the back-up lights, taillights, and brake lights, a strip-mall building at night with big windows may work well. Just back tail-in to a space, set the parking brake, and turn off the engine then bring the ignition key to the 'on' position without starting the engine. Run through all the lights, looking at their reflection. Good idea to check through them all once a month.

Keep the windshield clean. "Just a dirty windshield could cause big problems," said Downing. It's hard to stress the importance of visibility enough. Make sure there's a fresh set of wipers and that the washer bottle underhood is topped off on a regular basis with washer fluid, not water. There's a difference: Water combines with road grime to help make wipers smear, while washer fluid helps keep them clean. On another note, never set out on a cold morning without first scraping or wiping the frost or dew off the windshield, windows, and lights.

Then there are some important maintenance-minded habits for every time your son or daughter gets behind the wheel:

Do a walk-around, to spot anything unusual, especially eyeing the windows, tires, and front and back ends. In the quick check, they may find a flat before damaging the wheel, or, for instance, an object, child, or pet behind the car.

Look down at the gauges and idiot lights. Some cars come with a set of thorough gauges, while others only have a set of "idiot lights" that remind the driver when the engine is already overheating or when it's dangerously low in oil or oil pressure. If you have gauges, remind your son or daughter where the normal range is, and that if any of the idiot lights ever comes on, to pull over at the next safe place and call for advice.

Listen to the engine. When your young driver is learning, don't allow loud music; best not to listen to anything but the symphony of the road. "No matter what the vehicle, it's important to know what the vehicle is supposed to be like when it's running as normal," if a driver is more familiar with the normal sounds of the vehicle, he or she will be much more likely to recognize when something is wrong and avoid a breakdown or accident.

Get the car inspected at least once every year. Again, because teens tend to drive older vehicles this is especially important. Whatever the model, Skaiven said, "You should have the vehicle thoroughly inspected and repaired to make it worthy to drive. All of this should be done by a qualified mechanic." If the young driver isn't capable of paying for this, or bringing it up to safe and reliable running condition, he or she probably shouldn't be owning a vehicle.

Establish the responsibilities

Parents and children have different expectations about car privileges and the financial responsibilities of driving - and each family situation is different, too, so it's important to establish these responsibilities before something happens. The AAA officials agreed on one thing: before a teen driver gets car privileges, parents and child need to meet and come up with a contract, so it's understood what the young driver is expected to pay for and when they are allowed to use the car. If the new driver will have his or her own car, try to estimate what the maintenance expenses are going to be before he or she drowns in them.

If you're still worrying - and right you should - consider a driving school that teaches new drivers about cars and driving and accident avoidance. Don't rely on a simple Internet search for this. Ask your insurance agent, high school, car club, or the DMV.

Remember, the most effective way of getting the strategy to work is by inflicting an adult-like level of responsibility and accountability, and by clearly calling out the rules in advance. As is the case with all aspects of teen driving, set a good example. If you keep your own vehicle in good shape and are prepared for breakdowns or mishaps, it's more likely that your son or daughter will be, too.

Time for a change. A simple 1/2 day spent giving your car a wash and polish and cleaning the interior thoroughly will give the appearance of a well looked after and cared for vehicle.

Start with the exterior of the car, giving it a good wash, rinse and removing all loose water with a shammy leather before giving the vehicle a wax and polish.

Don't forget to clean all the bits you usually skim over - around the doors, inside the boot and inside the wheel arches.

If you are like me and enjoy cleaning your car, treat yourself to some bumper and trim restorer (usually a silicon based spray) and for that special touch some tyre blacking spray will make all the difference to the finished, and shiny, vehicle for sale.

It is whilst cleaning the exterior that you can look for large stone chips and scratches. Depending on the size, there are many products available at your local car accessory store to cover, fill or even re-spray all manner of body knocks.

Look at the wheels closely; if your hubs are badly 'kerbed' you might want to replace them, or if you have badly damaged alloys, there are repair kits available to buy or specialist repairers.

To show that your car is really cared for, you might want to consider giving the engine a wipe over or even a steam clean!

But, be careful with steam, as on older cars there are probably delicate components that won't take too kindly to a hard blast of hot steam. A simple wipe out with a wet cloth will give a better impression than caked greased, grime and dust from the road.

Whilst you're under the bonnet, get all the old leaves out of the air intakes and top up the various coolants, wash and hydraulic tanks too!

Every time someone looks at your vehicle, you can be guaranteed they'll have a nose under the bonnet (even if they no little or nothing about the mechanics). So, give a good impression - every part of your vehicle needs to look clean and cared for.

With the interior, have a good tidy up (don't just pile everything up in the glove compartment), and vacuum thoroughly using the attachments to get into all the nooks and crannies.

Although it is possible to buy all manner of trim restorers and cleaners, you can't beat good old washing up liquid and hot water! Using household polishes and high gloss finishers will make the interior look cheap and tacky (and over cleaned).

Be careful not to make the interior too smelly - don't go over the top with the air fresheners, unless of course you have smoked a lot in the car in which case use an odour neutraliser instead. If you have used the ashtray, give it a good wash in your kitchen sink and spray that too.

Clean the windows using a damp shammy or better still some window cleaner and whilst doing your rear window, use a side-to-side motion so as not to damage your heating element.

Before you finish, take a good look at the mats - if they are past their best, take them out and either replace them or just show the immaculate carpet underneath!

Finally, be aware of the new owner's tastes. Having replacement 'boy racer' accessories (pedals, steering wheel, dash panels &c) could give the impression that the vehicle has been thrashed; so replace them with the originals (if you still have them).

All being well, some time and small investment on your part could bring you an extra few pounds - you certainly won't lose it... or the sale!

Your car should now be gleaming! So, it's time to think about how and where to sell it and how much for.

How much is my car worth, There are a few places to get a good idea of how much your car is worth, but it is important to get your asking price right from the start. Too much, and you'll be sitting with an un-wanted vehicle for weeks. Too little, and someone is going to drive away more happy than you!

There are companies who specialise in vehicle valuations on the Internet or, take a look through Drive to see if there are vehicles similar to yours. Also, use your local newspapers, as they are an excellent indication to current asking prices.

Whichever method you choose, sell your vehicle for a realistic value.

Choosing the right medium to sell your vehicle can be more exhaustive than trying to buy one. websites and the local newspapers in your area to offer a much read package.

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If you are going to trade-in your vehicle, it is still very much in your interest to present a clean and cared for vehicle to the dealer, but you will not get as much as you could by selling privately.

If you own a rare or collectible vehicle that you want to sell, it may be worth looking for local owners clubs or clubs further a field. There are many listed on the Internet whose members might just be looking for your exact model.

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