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**Car Care '91**

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# Warning signs to look out for — and have your car checked soon

**By Valerie Fields**  
Staff Writer

For most people, buying a car is an investment. But what happens when that investment lets you down?

Every day and night people dish out dollars having their cars towed or repaired. Below are some hints, tips, and advice from mechanics about keeping your car in tip-top shape.

Most cars give a few warning signals before they quit completely, so here's an idea of what to look for.

If you are driving, and the car runs rough or uneven, it's probably due to improper tire inflation. Go to a service station and check the air pressure. Tires should be filled with the manufacturer's recommended amount of air. Pressure levels vary for different models.

Proper tire rotation keeps cars balanced and aligned. Tires should be rotated every 5,000 to 6,000 miles from front to back. Average prices for tire rotation are \$8-\$10. Cars with locked hubcaps will be charged more. Air for tires ranges from no cost to 25 cents.

Now that you are driving smooth and even, you can focus your attention on that clicking sound coming from under the hood. Unfortunately, this sound represents a little more than a lack of air. It probably means you're low in oil.

Again, go to the nearest service station unless you want to get that new suit stained, or if you're a practicing mechanic. Oil should be changed every three months or 3,000 to 4,000 miles. Including oil filter changes, that should cost about \$20 for small and average-sized American or foreign cars. Larger cars and cars with diesel engines usually cost more.

Another possible source of a clicking sound is the battery or a disconnection in the car's electrical system. Leave it up to a mechanic to find out.

As you turn out of the station, you notice a groaning sound coming from the steering wheel. Before you can identify what it is, though, you slam on the brakes but still manage to hit a Duke student. All you remember is a scrubbing brake sound. You have two problems. The steering wheel sound is probably due to a malfunction in the power steering system. The scrubbing brakes mean you need new brake pads and should have the brake rotors and drums checked. Prices vary for these services.

You've managed to hit a Dookie, but the car still isn't accelerating as fast as you'd like. If it seems to drag or falter when changing gears, there may be a problem with the timing belts. They should be checked every four years or 48,000 miles.

So you finally get home, and your car is running like new. But you never know what can happen, so just take it in for a complete tuneup to ease your mind.

The radiator should be checked every year or two. If it's dirty, it will need to be flushed. Belts and water pumps need to be checked and possibly replaced along with the hoses. New coolant, or antifreeze, also should be recycled. The total cost for having the radiator cleaned, flushed and recycled ranges from \$40-\$60 with parts and labor included.

The transmission should be checked every 15 months. If necessary, transmission fluid should be added, and the filters should be changed and replaced after about 25,000 to 30,000 miles. Most service stations can do the job for an average price of \$60.

Now that everything is working, all you need to do is start your engines. This shouldn't be a problem if the battery is in good condition. This power source has a problem if it needs to be jump-started more than once in the morning. Allow the engine to warm up before driving, especially in cold weather. Older cars without fuel injection should warm up for 10 to 15 minutes. Newer cars require only five minutes to warm up during cold weather.

Now your car is running like new.

But for those lucky people who actually have new cars, there are things you can do to keep them running well. Mechanics advise following the manufacturer's book guidelines for up to 100,000 miles. Then start over and go through the book again, rechecking everything.

Other signs to look for are smoke and leaks. Smoke coming from under the hood could mean an overheated radiator or a car which is "running hot." Loose gaskets on hoses or the water pipe also could be a source of smoke. Spilled oil or an oil leak may result in darker smoke.

Dim lights or a horn that doesn't blow are results of a failing battery. The car will probably need a jump-start. If the engine does not turn over at all, you'll probably need to get a new battery and "rev up" the charger system.

Again, a horn that doesn't blow, in addition to non-functional automatic locks and power windows, signifies a failure in the car's electrical system. This probably can be fixed by replacing a circuit for a cost of \$5.

For foreign cars, mechanics suggest the same maintenance techniques. Expect to wait a little longer because parts have to be shipped, and expect also to pay a little more.

For those who aren't mechanically inclined, there are still a few things you can do at home without crawling under the hood.

Always keep tires properly inflated to the recommended level. Tire levels should be checked once a month.

Keep all fluid levels maintained (water, oil, coolant). If you don't know what to look for, take a look at the dashboard. Most cars are equipped with a basic warning system to help detect things which aren't running smoothly. The fluid warning lights represent low gas and oil levels. The temperature light signifies an overheated engine, and the voltage light warns of possible engine failure.

Just a reminder that once your car is running smoothly, don't forget these things to keep it on the road legally. The horn should blow, all lights should work, windshield wipers should work, all tags need to be visible and your car should be inspected properly every year.

Most of these services can be found right here in Chapel Hill. Local stations offer balancing, brake work, electronic tuneups, front-end alignment, lubrication and tire service.

Special thanks to Troy Barnes of the Glen Lennox BP service station and Ron Ragan of East Franklin Car Care.

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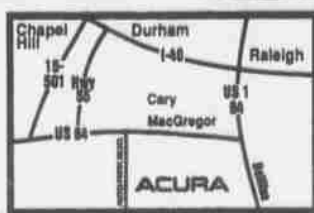
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