

Get in tune with your car

When does a car need a tune-up? What's the difference between a minor and a major tune-up? Is it worth the cost?

Few motorists know the answers to these questions, and yet a tune-up is one of the most important preventive maintenance services for your car.

Government and industry studies indicate that more than half of the more than 110 million vehicles on the road need tune-ups. A tuned engine, compared to one that is not, will improve gasoline mileage up to 10 per cent, improve acceleration up to 10 per cent and emit about half as much carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons.

How often should you tune your car?

Most auto makers recommend a tune-up every 12 months or 12,000 miles, at least. The lack of a periodic tune-up can result in fuel waste, excessive exhaust smoke, hard starts, stalling, rough engine performance and eventual repairs that could have been avoided.

If your car needs tune-up service, knowing what to ask for can keep it running smoothly and reduce your maintenance expenses in the long run. Although many reputable garages advertise tune-up specials, it pays to get the answers to a few questions before accepting any offer. For example: • What specifically is included in the advertised price? If you're getting less than a needed, full tune-up it may not be a bargain after all.

• Does the advertised price apply to your car? A tune-up for a four- or six-cylinder engine will cost less than one for an eight-cylinder engine.

• Is the garage using quality parts? Inferior replacement parts lower the overall repair cost, but you may need your

next tune-up sooner than expected.

• Is the garage equipped to do the job? To perform a thorough tune-up, minor or major, a technician requires modern diagnostic equipment. If a garage hasn't invested in the right tools, you may pay less, but you also may have to get the job done a second time.

What does a tune-up involve?

A minor, 12,000-mile tune-up usually includes replacement of the air filter, fuel filter, PCV (Positive Crankcase Ventilation) valve, spark plugs, distributor points and condenser. Spark plug wires, ignition coil and distributor cap and rotor should be inspected and replaced if necessary. Also, expect to pay a labor charge for adjustments to the carburetor, choke and ignition timing if the job is done properly.

Unless your car has a specific engine problem or has passed the 50,000-mile mark, it probably doesn't require major tune-up service. A major tune-up starts with parts and adjustments covered by a minor tune-up. In addition, it involves a series of diagnostic checks to test the car's engine compression, battery, alternator, voltage regulator, vacuum system and other ignition components to determine if any additional repairs are needed. The technician will also clean the carburetor and road-test the vehicle.

Tune-ups are no longer the relatively simple chores they once were. Do-it-yourself mechanics can still replace air cleaners, points and plugs, but because of emission control devices on late model cars, precision engine adjustments should be made by a trained service technician using proper equipment.

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