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#### Greasing the wheels

Check your car to prevent holiday breakdowns, AAA says

By [Kristen Gerencher](#), CBS.MarketWatch.com

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SAN FRANCISCO (CBS.MW) - The last thing time-pressed holiday travelers need is a car breakdown, but that's just what a major automobile club is forecasting for an estimated 4.5 million U.S. motorists this season.

However, it doesn't have to be that way. Many drivers can keep the show on the road by taking care of under-inflated tires, insufficient tire treads, old hoses and dirty fluid before setting off on their homeward and vacation treks, AAA spokesman Geoff Sundstrom said.

One in three vehicles is now overdue for preventive maintenance, according to AAA, which based its projections on exams at its car clinics last month and members' emergency roadside requests during November and December of 2001.

Most of the required fixes are inexpensive and easy to accomplish, Sundstrom said.

"The No. 1 thing is simply that tires aren't inflated, which isn't a major issue itself but can lead to blowouts, compromises fuel economy, and can degrade the braking distance in a car," he said. "It can even lead to an accident."

AAA projects that 30.8 million Americans will take a car trip this Thanksgiving, up 1 percent from last year.

When in doubt, it pays to err with too much car care vigilance, especially in the cold winter months, said Mary S. Butler,



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"If you do an oil change every 3,000 miles and you're 300 miles away, don't wait until you get back from the trip. Get it checked beforehand," she said. "Even if you just go in for an oil change, why not find out if something's loose or about to fall out?"

### Pre-holiday checklist

Consumers are wise to check for the following problems before they hit the road:

- Tire pressure. Thirty percent of AAA-inspected cars had improper inflation, Sundstrom said. Motorists typically can find stickers indicating the correct pressure for front and back wheels in the driver's side door, he said. Many stations charge only a nominal 25 or 50-cent fee, and many others let you use the air machine for free.
- Maintain fluids. Check motor oil, antifreeze, transmission and power-steering fluid to make sure it's not low or dirty. More than one in four cars turned up fluid problems, AAA said.
- Beware of insufficient tire tread depth. Drivers can find out whether a tire is past its prime by putting a penny in the gap between the treads, Sundstrom said. "If you can see Lincoln's head above the tread, then you probably don't have enough tread left on your tire." In recent AAA inspections, 16 percent of vehicles had at least one tire that needed to be replaced.
- Lighten up. Check for faulty headlights, failed bulbs, switches or misdirected beams. "Have someone stand in front and behind the vehicle to tell if the turn signals, brake lights and emergency flashers are working because that's not going to be obvious to you as you're driving your car," Sundstrom said.
- Check the battery. A low charge or loose or corroded connections can cause the car to have trouble starting, problems found in 10 percent of vehicles in AAA's October inspections. Despite many warranties that tout four, five and six-year life spans, AAA recommends replacing the battery every 18 to 24 months, Sundstrom said.
- Inspect belts and hoses. Anticipate replacing them every four years, Sundstrom said. Hoses were blistered, cracked or glazed on 8 percent of vehicles, indicating they were likely to fail in the near future and should be replaced, AAA found at car clinics in October.
- Make sure your auto emergency kit is complete and up to date with blankets, flashlights, flares, an air pressure gauge and jumper cables, among other items. Consumers caught in snow storms may also benefit from small heat packs that can keep them warm when the engine's not running, Butler

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said. Personal GPS navigation systems and engine block heaters may be appropriate as well, she said.

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