

THE PLAIN DEALER

If you don't do anything else to your car, at least change the oil

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What happens to a vehicle isn't very pretty if it is run on low or dirty oil. Of all the fluids in your car, oil can do the most damage in the shortest amount of time if you completely neglect it.

Motor oil, a lubricant for internal combustion engines, creates a film between your vehicle's moving parts, which helps to decrease friction and wear. Oil also helps carry away heat from moving parts, which is important because heat can make parts less resistant. And because oil protects parts from being exposed to the oxygen in the air, there is less rust and corrosion.

Viscosity, which mechanics love to talk about, is the thickness of oil. Just know oil should be thick enough to be an effective lubricate but not so thick that it can't move around an engine in all temperatures and environmental conditions.

Motor oil is amazingly controversial. First, there is the big petroleum-based/crude oil versus synthetic oil debate. Synthetic oils and synthetic blends are made from chemicals and compounds not present in crude oil.

"Most people do not need to spend extra money on synthetic oil," said Kristin Huff, an oil analyst with Blackstone Laboratories in Fort Wayne, Indiana. "If someone is racing on a track, they may need synthetic oil because it is a high-temperature, hard environment for an engine. But if you are just going to the grocery store, work, or your kids' school, you don't need synthetic."

Blackstone Laboratories is an independent laboratory that offers "a quick, nondestructive way to gauge the health of an engine by looking at what's in the oil," according to company information. Huff said most oil checks her company performs show no engine problems. But the analysis can tell vehicle owners if there is a problem, if the cars can run longer between oil changes, and if the oil they are using is "worth it" for their needs. The test kits are free and the analysis is \$22.50. For more information, visit www.blackstone-labs.com.

"It is important to pay attention to manufacturers' suggestions as to the grade of oil that should be used. If they say use 5-30, use 5-30. Your engine won't blow up if you put in a 15-30. But the people who make the engines know what they are doing. The brand doesn't really matter. I would never pay more for oil just because of its name," said Huff.

Tom Morley, president of The Lube Stop, Inc., headquartered in Berea, agrees that most people do not need synthetic oil. He does believe that a synthetic oil can possibly extend the life of an engine and also slightly increase fuel efficiency. Morley said a number of cars, including Corvettes, BMWs, Cadillacs, and some hybrids, now require synthetic oil. Not following oil guidelines can void warranties.

How often should oil be changed? Mark Toflinski, service advisor at Classic Ford in Mentor, changes his own vehicle's oil every 3,000 miles.

"But they say you can go up to 5,000 miles with some synthetics, and some manufacturers say you can go up to 7,500. I think that's a little drastic. I suggest checking it every 3,000 to 5,000 miles," said Toflinski, whose dealership uses synthetic blends in its service department.

For the 25 percent of Lube Stop customers who drive cars 10 years old or older, Morley recommended a three-month/3,000 mile oil change. But he believes most new cars can go 5,000 miles between oil changes.

Blackstone Laboratories won't recommend one brand of oil over another. But Huff ran her Pontiac Vibe 9,000 miles before an oil change "and it was fine."

An advertised \$35 oil change can quickly escalate to a \$60 oil change, sometimes for legitimate reasons and sometimes for reasons that are not so clear. Be prepared to pay extra for synthetic oil if you want or must use it. Ask how many quarts of oil are included in the advertised price and if an oil filter, which should be changed at each oil change, is also a part of the posted price. Some states have additional "shop supply fees" where permitted by law.

Dave Dembinski, deputy section chief with Ohio's Consumer Protection Section, said legitimate shop fees must be clearly and conspicuously disclosed.

Consumers should not receive surprises when they see their final bill, according to Deminski.

"Shops used to pay to get rid of waste oil. But those days are long gone," said Morley, whose company also provides free fuel-efficiency checks and who has been recognized for his green practices. "We get paid a significant amount per gallon for waste oil. One of the first things I did when I got here in 2004 was to get rid of the environmental fee that customers were charged. It is a black eye on the industry if anyone still does that."

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