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What you need to know about your tires

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Tires are black and round, but what else should I know about them? This is definitely a case where not knowing industry and tire company recommendations can hurt you. Failure to follow these recommendations can lead to an inconvenient breakdown at best, and, at worst, a serious accident.

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Tire Mileage: Modern tires will normally provide from 20,000 to 60,000 miles prior to needing replacement for worn tread. The mileage will differ based on the TREADWEAR rating of the tire -- generally molded into the sidewall. The higher the TREADWEAR rating, the higher the mileage. On some high performance vehicles driven aggressively, 15,000 -- 20,000 miles will be the most you can expect.

Tire Aging: Most European vehicle manufacturers, and since 2005, Ford as well as Chrysler recommend that tires be replaced after 6 years of service. That owner's manual in the glove compartment of these cars will contain statements such as: "Warning! -- Tire aging is a serious safety risk. Any tire that is 6 years old must be removed from service and replaced with new tires immediately, including spare tires and those being stored for future use. Tire aging is a hazard because tires degrade over time, even when they are not being used and even when they have sufficient tread depth and no visible signs of damage. Failure to remove and replace tires that are 6 years or older can result in sudden tire failure. You could lose control of your vehicle and have a traffic incident resulting in serious injury or death."

Most major tire manufacturers (Bridgestone/Firestone, Michelin, Continental, Cooper) now recommend replacement of tires after 10 years. Japanese car manufacturers and General Motors have not yet made tire replacement recommendations based solely upon aging.

As the result of the November 2000 TREAD Act (passed after the Firestone Wilderness tire failures on the Ford Explorer) the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is still conducting tests to determine whether there should be a REMOVE BY DATE, or USE BY DATE on the side of the tire.

However, that decision has already been made by most vehicle and tire manufacturers. Now that you are aware of these warnings and recommendations, you will be able to make your own decision for you and your family.

Tire Pressures: The November 2000 TREAD Act also mandated that all vehicles sold in the United States since model year 2007 be equipped with a Tire Pressure Monitoring System (TPMS) to notify the driver that the pressure in one or more of the tires is too low. Depending on the vehicle, this warning may be either spelled out, or show a yellow lighted exclamation point inside a tire on the instrument panel. After-market Tire Pressure Monitoring Systems may be purchased and installed on older vehicles at many tire dealers and car dealerships.

For those with older vehicles, at the very minimum, purchase and use a good tire pressure gauge, and use it regularly. To ignore this annoying yellow light or a low pressure gauge reading could be dangerous, in that a major cause of tire failure and subsequent accidents, is operation at below the recommended tire pressure.

Replacement Tire Sizes: There is no disagreement between NHTSA, vehicle manufacturers or the tire manufacturers on the subject of replacement tire size. All replacement tires should be the identical size as the original equipment shown on the door placard on the inside edge of the driver door jam or in the owner's manual. At most, some tire manufacturers only allow for a 3% increase in diameter. Does that mean that jacked up trucks are unsafe on the road?

It sure does.

Tire Placement: When replacing only two tires, tire manufacturers all specify that the deepest tread tire should be placed on the rear axle to prevent hydroplaning.

As they used to say on the old TV show Hill Street Blues -- "Be safe out there."

Hagerty is a former tire and auto repair shop owner who has more than 15 years of experience investigating and testifying on the Standards of Care for and against shops and car dealerships that install tires. Hagerty's website is Hagertyinvestigations.com.

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