

Fast new diagnostics

BY VINCE HANCOCK
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Traverse Motors is offering a free new service for checking basic car problems, which can help improve vehicle efficiency, said Dave Courtad, service manager.

The Altesco Diagnostic Test System is based on technology that's been available in Europe. According to Courtad, Traverse Motors is the first in the area to offer the machine.

The first three weeks of operation, he said, have proved the diagnostics machine's efficiency. In a minute or less, the machine can check brakes, alignment and suspension. Typically, vehicle diagnostics can take up to 45 minutes.

"Of course nobody can inspect the thickness of brake pads without pulling the wheel off, but this tells you if one tire's braking more than the other, or if the front is doing more work than the rear," said Courtad.

"Northern Michigan roads do have a few potholes. If a customer hits one, they would be welcome to come in and we'll run it. If everything is fine — great. If not, we'll look at it a little further."

FUEL

Efficiency relies on a number of factors

FROM PAGE 6

with grass and weeds.

The owner's manual can tell you how often, along with the environment.

"If you live on a dirty and dusty road, you want to do it twice as much," he added.

Jeremy Schaudt, head mechanic at the Goodyear Auto Service Center in Traverse City, also promotes regular inspection.

If you can't find the spark plugs yourself, they should still be replaced every 60,000 miles, even if manufacturers' "platinum" plugs boast a 100,000 mile limit. If you wait that long, said Schaudt, a "check engine" light may come on, or worse.

"The spark plugs might seize in the cylinder heads and you'll end up breaking plugs or twisting threads out and cause all kinds of misery by not keeping those maintenance intervals," he explained.

Proper tire inflation can reduce the load on your engine and save a bit of gas, but there's no simple formula.

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Jamison suggested looking at the numbers printed on the tire's sidewall rather than the suggestions in the manual.

"The book doesn't know what brand of tire you have," he said, noting that the manufacturer's suggestions may no longer apply if the tires are replaced.

Schaudt, however, prefers the label on the car door.

"The specs on the side of the tire," he said, "tell you the maximum pressure at maximum load."

Too much air can prematurely wear out the center of the tire tread. Whereas the number on the tire might suggest 50psi for light passenger cars, 35 pounds would be plenty, says Schaudt. Full-size trucks and SUVs usually need up to 45 pounds.

So which is it? In a sense, both are right.

"It still leaves you in kind of a gray area," said Jon Keillor, who says some investigation can help you find the best tire pressure. "Like this Taurus that's sitting right in front of me now. The sidewall on the tire says 45 pounds. Well, that thing would drive like a truck if you had that much air in there."

He pointed out that the door sticker gives a recommendation of 30psi.

A little above the recommended pressure can make the tire roll easier, and a driving test can reveal if you've put in too much air, said Keillor.

"If you don't like the ride, back it off a little and see if you can find a compromise," he added.

What of the often-quoted tip of reducing one's driving speed to 55 miles per hour? That, too, may depend on the vehicle.

Keillor said he could give examples of better mileage from both higher and lower speeds. The fuel itself may be a factor. In some cases, mid-grade and premium gasolines can improve mileage enough to offset the savings of cheaper gas.

With the dominance of fuel-injection systems, Jamison isn't convinced that lower speeds translate into efficiency, but they might help in one way.

"They might help your pocketbook when it comes to speeding tickets," he said.

All three mechanics have their own tips for the coming winter months.

"You lose some air as the cold weather comes, so it's kind of critical to check your tires again in the winter time," said Keillor. For every eight to 10 degrees that the temperature drops, about a

pound of pressure is lost.

Dean Jamison suggested keeping a fuller tank during the winter. Aside from the rust potential, the condensation can affect performance.

"Especially in northern Michigan, with water build-up inside the gas tank, it's good to fill it back up when the tank is half-empty," he said. While he rarely sees the water mixture problem in his shop, he said it's a good preventative action.

Jeremy Schaudt advised against wasting gas by using remote car starters, a temptation when warming up the car during cold weather.

"They probably get worse fuel mileage than anybody else," he said, "especially today's SUVs that have a lot of motor in them."

Jon Keillor agreed that remote starters affect efficiency.

Two to three minutes is plenty for warm-up time, even in cold weather, said Keillor, especially when using a good quality oil. The heater circuits, too, usually draw from the first heat the engine can make, so it shouldn't take too long for both you and your car to warm up.

Vince Hancock is a local freelance writer.

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