

Know when it's time to replace worn tires

By Peter Bohr
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I've gotten a lot of mileage out of the subject of tires during my years writing this column. And, I'm still mildly surprised that there's always more to say about these seemingly simple hunks of rubber.

I recently came across an unusually readable and helpful brochure from Bridgestone Tire entitled "Tire Tips To Keep You Rolling." It sheds some new light on an old subject.

Among other matters, the brochure offers innovative pointers to help you determine when it's time to replace your tires.

Of course, if you happen to run over a rock and shred your tire's sidewall to bits, there's a pretty strong indication that you'll have to replace it. But, in most cases, you'll need to buy new tires when the tread on your old tires becomes too worn.

As the Bridgestone brochure explains, the tread is the part of the tire that touches the ground; believe it or not, the tread is only about as thick as your finger. When the tread wears away — after 25,000-45,000 miles or so — the tires will lose their grip on the road's surface, especially under adverse conditions, like wet weather. Smooth or "bald" tires are not only dangerous, but they're illegal in many states.

Therefore, you certainly don't want

to drive on a set of tires that has worn anywhere near the point of baldness. But how do you tell when too much tread is gone?

Most tires have so-called "wear bars" built into them. Look along the tread of your tires, inside the grooves. At some point, you should find a row of small, raised bits of rubber that run across the tire's width. If the tread is no higher than these wear bars, it's time for new tires.

There are a couple of other ways to determine how much tread is left. For one, let your fingers do some walking around your tires. Feel each tire all the way around its tread. If you feel any unusually high, low or smooth areas, you may need new tires.

These flat or worn spots are called "irregular treadwear," and they have a variety of causes. If you leave your car parked for several weeks or months at a time without moving it, the tires may develop flat spots. Manufacturing defects can cause them as well. If your car's suspension is out of alignment, it will cause irregular treadwear. But, if you catch irregular wear soon enough, you stand a good chance of saving the tire.

Finally, you can use a penny to check normal treadwear. That's right: take the smallest coin of the realm and stick it in a groove of a tire's tread. Make sure you stick it in so that Abraham Lincoln's head points down into the tread. If you see that part of

Abe's head is obscured by the tread, the tire still has enough tread left to be safe. But, if you can see all of his head, you're ready for a new tire.

Though the Bridgestone brochure doesn't mention it, worn-away tread isn't the only indication that your car deserves a new set of tires. Age can destroy tires, too. Over time, heat, cold, dirt and even smog will cause tires to deteriorate. So, even though a tire may have plenty of tread left, it can still be unsound.

Give your tires an especially close inspection if they're more than four years old. Examine the tread for any unusually deep cracks which may show that the tread is separating from the tire's carcass.

Look, too, for any deep cracks in the sidewall that could indicate the tire is dry-rotting. At first, these cracks may cause the tire to develop a slow leak and, if you don't catch it soon enough, flatten.

If you're not sure how old your tires are, there's a handy way to find out. Look for the Department of Transportation code on the sidewall. It's printed on the outside sidewall on some tires, while on others it's on the inside sidewall.

You'll find the letters "DOT" followed by a series of characters. The last three numbers tell the week and the year the tire was made. For example, 426 indicates the tire was made in the 42nd week of 1986.

Car tips for car trips

Getting ready to motor? In that case you'll want to prepare your car so it won't break down and spoil your trip.

Before taking it to your technician for detailed servicing, give your car the once over yourself. Start with the tires, checking for excessive or uneven tread wear and under-inflation, which you can test with an inexpensive pressure gauge. Follow the proper tire inflation instructions printed in raised letters on each tire wall.

Giving the once over

Make certain all interior and exterior lights and lenses are in good condition and replace any that are cracked or burned out.

Since it's bound to rain some time during the spring, replace cracked or worn wiper blades.

While some of the many fluids in your car should be checked by your technician, there's no harm in personally checking the levels of such fluids as your oil, windshield washer and, only when the engine is cold,

your radiator. If they're low, top them up.

While you're under the hood, have a close look at all belts and hoses. If they're cracked, frayed or brittle, have them replaced. The same goes for loose or corroded metal clamps.

Noisy or spongy brakes, loose steering and warm shocks each contribute to poor handling, not to mention reduced safety. Bring any of these conditions to your technician's attention.

Pre-trip car service should always be performed at least a week before you plan to leave. That's so your technician can make any post-service adjustments that might be necessary.

To ready your car for the long trip, he'll replace dirty air, oil and fuel filters; check the battery, spark plugs

and wheel alignment. He'll also check and replenish those fluids you don't, like the brake and transmission fluids.

It may be necessary for him to adjust your carburetor and valves; to tighten drive belts and to reset ignition timing.

Since, as I've said before, no tune-up is complete without a thorough emission control system check, he'll likely give that the once over, too.

Take some spares

It's a good idea to stow a few replacement parts and emergency equipment in your trunk before you take to the road. Things like electrical or duct tape, spare fan belt, some flares and, of course, a flashlight with fresh batteries, can come in handy.

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