

Personal maintenance saves money

Like any mechanical device, your automobile requires regular maintenance. Some areas require a mechanic or technician; others can be handled by you, the owner. The amount of money you can save is directly related to the degree of knowledge you possess about your automobile. Do not mislead yourself into believing your car doesn't need to be regularly maintained. If you or a professional do not perform the service, your car's condition will rapidly deteriorate. You then face high repair bills and loss of transportation.

What are the routine maintenance jobs that any novice can perform? They are regular checking of the car's major fluids—battery, radiator, crankcase oil—and tire pressure. These areas should be checked when you fill up with gasoline or at least once a month. Since the need for these fluids may not be as obvious as the need for gasoline, you are responsible for checking the other fluid systems in order to deter major damage. In most cases, your automobile gauges will give you strong indications about fluid conditions. However, visual checking is still highly recommended.

Let's start with oil. Your motor needs lubrications to work efficiently. Some cars burn more oil than others, so your car and your driving habits may influence how often you need to add oil. Find the oil stick located under the hood of your car. Check the level indicator when the car is cool. If you have been running the engine, some oil may be distributed throughout the engine and prevent your getting an accurate reading on the stick.

Oil weights (viscosity) and filter changes will vary according to the type of car you drive, the weather conditions

and the amount of driving you do. Read your car manual for suggestions about these items.

The oil used in your engine performs four functions. It lubricates the moving parts of the engine and reduces friction. Reduced friction reduces wear and tear on the motor. Oil acts as an engine coolant to keep the metal at a safe temperature. It cleans out dirt particles by depositing them in the oil filter. Oil also serves as a sealant between cylinder walls and piston rings. Obviously, then, checking the oil is very important to motor efficiency. Not checking the oil regularly may result in a costly repair called engine overhaul.

Next, check your car's battery. This device provides the electrical current that enables your car to start. If you see white ashy residue on the terminals or cable ends, clean it off with a wire brush. Cover the exposed metal with grease (petroleum jelly) to resist corrosion. Then check each cell for fluid level. You should be able to see the fluid as a little concave bubble about two inches inside the cell. If the cell fluid is low, fill it with distilled water until you see the concave bubble. Do not fill to overflowing. The overflow will be battery acid which is corrosive to you and your car.

Regular battery checkups ensure long life and save dollars in battery replacement. Keeping an eye on the battery gauge will usually tell you about its condition. If the charge is lower than usual, it's definitely time to check the battery. If it's discharging, you have a problem that should be attended to immediately. See a professional.

Another part that you can easily maintain under the hood of your car is the radiator. Check its fluid level by removing the cap on the radiator. Avoid checking the radiator when the car has been running. It may be hot enough to burn you should steam escape when the cap is removed. If you have been running the car, but it is not overheated, you can use a towel to protect your hands. The cap has a half-turn safety

lock that will enable the heat to escape before you completely remove the cap. If you misjudge the pressure, the safety cap will prevent it from blowing off and hitting you.

Never remove the cap on the radiator or even release it halfway if the car's gauge reads HOT or above normal. You will be injured and/or burned if you attempt to do so. If your car overheats due to hot weather, slow driving conditions or faulty fan belts, do this: Pull off the road and shut down the engine. Get out and raise the hood after you turn on your hazard lights. Do NOT touch the radiator. Let the car cool down for thirty minutes to one hour. You'll know how long by the gauge reading.

While the car is cooling, you may attempt to find a service station since you will most likely need assistance. Your car may overheat if it has a low fluid level in the radiator, loose or broken fan belts, or a damaged or cracked radiator or head gasket. Under any of these circumstances, you will need assistance to get the car to a service station.

When you check the fluid in your radiator and find you need to add more, it is safest to add pre-mixed coolant. That way you are assured of running your car with the proper water/alcohol mixture.

While checking fluids, don't forget the windshield fluid container. Once again, pre-mixed fluids for cleaning windshields are your safest bet. In the long run, using the pre-mixed fluids may cost you a bit, but not nearly as much as replacement of major parts due to damage.

The last item requiring regular maintenance is tire pressure. You can find the appropriate pressure level in the car's maintenance manual or on the tires. Radials will always list the pressure required on the sidewalls. Use a pressure gauge to check your tires once a month. Weather and driving conditions will cause pressure changes. Under extreme weather conditions and usage, check the pressure more than once a month.

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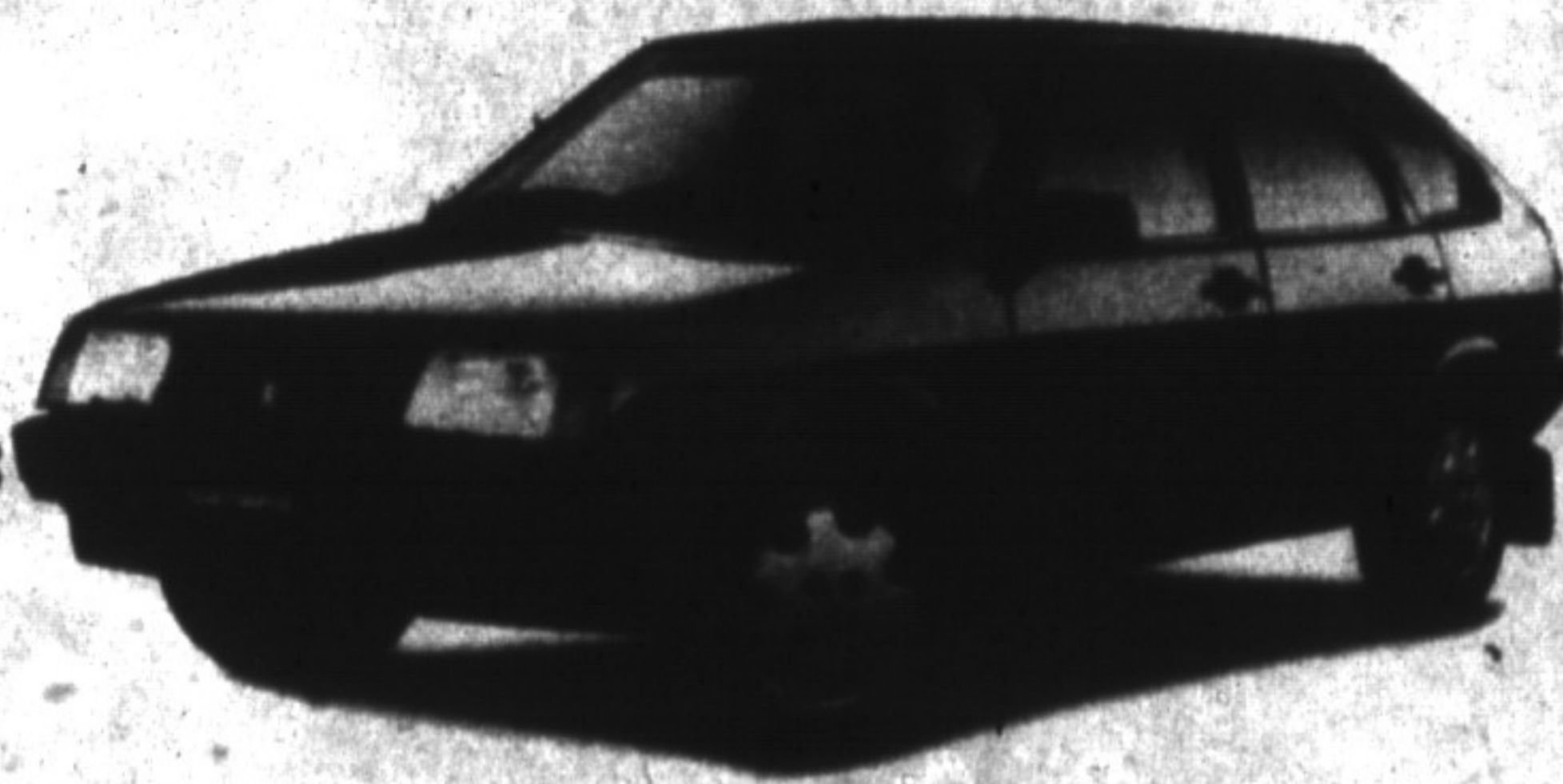
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