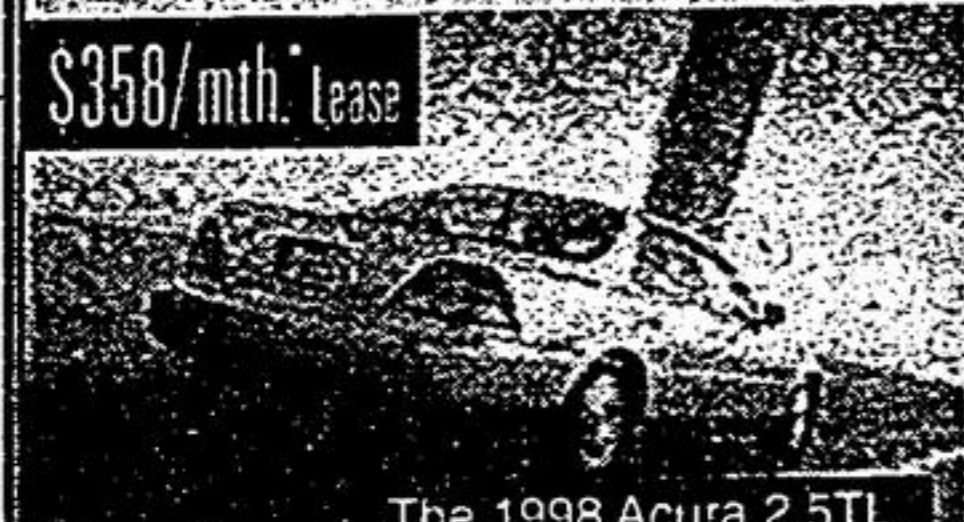


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Ahh, summer. Warm days, drives in the countryside, picnics on the beach. And road construction. There you are, stuck in traffic and it's a sweltering 32°C. Fortunately, with your air conditioning on, it's a comfortable 24°C inside the car. For many people, air conditioning is a must have option.

Air conditioning works on the principle that evaporating fluid takes heat out of the air. The refrigerant vapour is first compressed to liquefy it, then it evaporates. This chills and dehumidifies the air coming into the car.

The refrigerant that has been used with great success over the years has been Freon, or R-12.

However, R-12, as a chlorofluorocarbon, has been partly responsible for depletion of the ozone layer. In the last couple of years, car manufacturers have converted to R-134a, a hydrofluorocarbon that is much less harmful to the environment.

If you have an older car, it may be possible to convert your air conditioning to R-134a. Ask your car service provider about conversion kits.

If not, you should be aware that R-12 is no longer being manufactured. While stocks are available, their use is tightly controlled and a great deal of care is taken to prevent leaks and spills to protect the ozone layer. A number of provinces completely prohibit the use of R-12.

You should have your air conditioning system checked at least once a year to make sure it has no leaks, seals and belts are in good shape and it's running efficiently.

As it cools, the air conditioning system also takes moisture out of the air. The air conditioning is usually coupled with the windshield defrost so that it will clear the window more quickly.

There is always a concern when you walk towards your car and see a pool of something underneath. In summer, don't panic — your air conditioner takes water out of the air, and it drains onto the ground.

So if you have been driving with the air conditioning on, and then you park, you will probably see the water draining from the air conditioner as you walk away and a puddle under your car when you return.

If the puddle doesn't look like water, then it's okay to panic.

Some people are concerned about the fuel economy penalty of air conditioning.

It's true that when you use the air conditioning at full blast in city driving, you pay a price — perhaps as much as 15 to 20 per cent increase in your fuel consumption.

When you look at it over the course of a year's driving, though, it's much less significant. The annual fuel consumption penalty is less than five per cent, probably more like two per cent.

Most people consider that a small price to pay for being able to chill out in the summer.

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