

Electric cars a few years away

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Look at the tire maker's suggested air pressure, not the car maker's, he advised. "Cars and tires now are so individualized you have to get the right combination."

By itself, improper alignment can steal three to 10 per cent of your fuel economy, "because (the tires) are being scuffed as they're going down the road."

There's also wind resistance to consider. Getting narrow tires can get you better mileage, "especially if you have a van or something like that," suggested Mike Lutz, manager of Auto Accessories Plus in Markham.

If you have a truck, a tonneau cover or a tailgate net can alter the wind pattern around it, he added. But trying to save gas by customizing the family runabout with a racer's air dam, spoiler or side skirts would be a waste, Lutz said.

'People are still buying the car that they want. Sure, they're mad, but what can they do about it?'

You can always dump the Chevy Suburban or Ford Explorer in your life and get something frugal, such as a Toyota Echo, which burns 5.5 litres per 100 km of highway driving, or a mere seven in the city.

The new compact is selling well at Richmond Hill Toyota, but the larger Corolla is going even faster, said sales rep Howie Lowe.

"People are still buying the car that they want," despite steeper gas prices, he added. "Sure, they're mad, but what can they do about it?"

You might be able to convert your car to natural gas, but that could cost you \$3,000.

You could hold out for an electric car. Ford hopes to be selling a line of electric vehicles, called Think, here in a year or two, said Chris Banks, a Ford Canada spokesperson.

Or you could wait for Ballard, a Canadian company, to perfect the hydrogen fuel cell.

Ford debuted compact sedan and sport-utility prototype vehicles last year, running on the company's fuel cell technology. It uses hydrogen from natural gas, petroleum, or methanol to produce electricity.

Banks said Ford plans to put a fuel cell vehicle on the market by 2004.

"The automobile companies do see the handwriting on the wall and are pursuing this," York University economist Bernie Wolf said.

In the short run, people and governments can't do much to reduce dependence on petroleum, agreed John Banka, co-chairperson of Environmentalists Plan Transportation.

But in the next 20 years, providing better public transit, encouraging people to live closer to work and building denser neighbourhoods where residents can walk to stores and services will be essential, he said, because many experts say demand for oil will exceed supply by then.



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEN

Stewart Abram, manager of Markham Tire, checks the tire pressure before putting it back on a car. Proper pressure is the key to saving cash at the pump.

FUEL FRIENDLY TIPS

Here are six tips from the Canadian Automobile Association on reducing your cost at the pump:

- Don't let your car idle — it wastes more gas than restarting the engine.
- A smooth running engine and clean air filter save gas. Out-of-tune engines can use 3 to 8 per cent more gas.
- Inflate tires properly, checking the owner's manual. For every pound under the recommended pressure, your car could be burning 2 per cent more gas.
- Forget premium fuel — fewer than 10 per cent of our cars actually need it. Buy the lowest grade of gas your manual recommends.
- Travel at steady speeds, avoiding jack-rabbit starts and sudden stops. If possible, coast to a red light rather than rush up to it.
- Combine some of your errands and try shopping closer to home, walking, car-pooling or taking transit.

Source: CAA Central Ontario

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