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April 17, 2026
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How to choose the right car for you



Choosing a car is an important decision that depends on a combination of your needs, budget, desired features, the competition's offerings and even your brand preferences. If you're new to car buying or haven't made a purchase in many years, it can be hard to know where to begin. How do you choose a car that will exactly suit your needs for years to come? It just takes a little research and planning. When you know the kind of car you want, you can then decide whether you want to buy a new car, lease a new car, or buy a used car.

Steps for how to choose a car:

- Assess your needs
- Set your budget
- Decide if you want to lease or buy
- Consider other cars in the class
- Weigh the costs of ownership
- Find cars for sale
- Set up a test drive
- What to look for in a test drive
- Pick your car
- Time to buy or lease

Step 1: Assess your needs
Have you ever wondered, "Which car is right for me?" That answer depends on what you expect from a daily driver. Some people like to make a statement with their cars, and some like to go for spirited drives on weekends. In those cases, practicality tends

to take a back seat while emotions and feelings take the wheel.

But for those who need a vehicle for daily duties, function should come before form. Here are some practical considerations to keep in mind:

- How many passengers do you regularly have in your car? Do you occasionally need more seating capacity, for example, if friends are visiting?
- What type of driving do you do? Is it primarily highway, surface streets, off-road, etc.?
- Do you have a long commute, and because of that, is fuel economy important to you?
- If you're considering an electric vehicle, how much range do you need?
- Do you often encounter inclement weather, and if so, do you need all-wheel drive?
- What are your must-have features? Think surround-view camera system, leather seats, Apple CarPlay, etc.
- What safety features are important to you? Do you want blind-spot warning, lane departure warning and automatic emergency braking, for example?
- What cargo capacity do you need?
- Will you be using children's car seats?
- Will you be doing any towing?

• How many garage or parking spaces do you have?

Step 2: Set your budget
Unless you're paying cash for your car, you'll need to think about financing your purchase or lease as well as decide which car to buy.

How much can you really afford to allocate toward a car payment each month? The general rule is that your monthly new car payment should not exceed 15% of your monthly take-home pay. A used car will be less expensive, but the same rule should apply. If you're looking to lease, aim for a monthly payment that's less than 10% of your take-home pay. You'll also want to factor in an additional 7% of your monthly income to cover fuel and insurance costs. Knowing your budget beforehand will help you when negotiating your next car or truck.

The Edmunds affordability calculator lists vehicles that fall into the price range you've predetermined, which can make finding the right car based on a monthly payment easier. Keep in mind that the prices on the results page will change based on the trim level, options, taxes and finance fees.

Step 3: Decide if you want to lease or buy

There are pros and cons to both leasing and buying, and your priorities may dictate which is the best option for you. For example, a lease requires little or no money down and offers lower monthly payments. But when the lease ends, you will have no car and will need to go shopping again. On the other hand, buying a car is more expensive initially, and the monthly payments are higher. But when you pay off the loan, you will own a car that you can drive for as long as it runs. Here are a few more factors to consider when deciding between leasing and buying:

Leasing

- You can drive a more expensive car for less money.

• You can drive a new car with the latest technology every few years.

• Most repairs will be covered under the factory warranty.

• There are no trade-in hassles at the end of the lease.

Buying

• You have more flexibility to sell the car whenever you want.

• You can modify the car to your tastes.

• There are no mileage penalties if you drive a lot.

• Your car expenses will be lower in the long run, provided you pay off the car and keep it for a while.

Step 4: Consider other cars in the class

You might have your mind (or heart) set on a specific car or brand. But new cars are always hitting the showrooms in today's rapidly evolving marketplace, and one that you've never even considered could be right for you. Edmunds lets you research and compare similar cars to find the one that truly fits you best.

Even if you already have a car in mind, you should still review comparable vehicles in the same class or price range to make sure you haven't overlooked an even better choice. You can do this by choosing the same vehicle type, as listed in our car finder tool, and setting the parameters that are important to you. Once you settle on a worthy prospect, you can easily check for detailed information on pricing, specifications and features. You can also compare vehicles you chose to more easily contrast features and specifications.

If, on the other hand, you only know what type of vehicle you want — an SUV, for example — you can consult the corresponding "Edmunds best" section. It lists the highest-ranking vehicles we've tested in several categories. There are also Edmunds Top Rated picks, annual awards we give to the best of the best.

Has car shopping changed?

The shopping process has improved for most people, particularly those who use the online car research tools.

Step 5: Weigh the costs of ownership

Some cars may be cheaper to buy up front but more expensive to own in the long run. Even if two cars have about the same price, one might depreciate faster or cost more to insure and maintain.

Edmunds has a great evaluation tool, True Cost to Own, which presents depreciation, fuel, and maintenance costs in an easy-to-read format. It can help you make a smart decision up front that can save you thousands of dollars over the life of the car.

Step 6: Find cars for sale

The old method of car shopping had you walking from dealership to dealership in person to find out if they had the cars and options you wanted. Now, using the dealer inventory tools on Edmunds, you can quickly cover more ground and save money. Once you have chosen one or two cars that are right for you, you can easily see their local availability.

If you don't find what you want in your immediate area, select a greater distance to search. You can also filter your search to find cars in a specific color, with different options, or based on Edmunds' price rating.

Edmunds' inventory listings often display the market value of the vehicle, along with an overall grade of the price, from "great" to "high." Once you're ready to lease or buy, we recommend contacting a few dealerships to get price quotes since the discounts (or lack thereof) can vary from one retailer to the next. You'll usually hear back from the dealership via an email, text or phone call soon after you request the information. This is the time to verify that the car is in stock, schedule a test drive, and ask any additional questions. If you're not ready to complete the deal, make a note of which dealerships have the vehicle you want and contact them when you're ready.

Step 7: Set up a test drive

Now that you've found a car that seems like a good fit for you, it's time to call, text or email the dealership's internet department to schedule a day and time for a test drive. Internet salespeople are great allies since they cater to informed buyers and tend to be more upfront with pricing.

Making a test-drive appointment with your local dealership ensures that the car will be waiting for you when you arrive. We recommend test-driving about three different vehicles so that you don't limit your options. Try to schedule a few appointments back to back; it will

make comparing the cars easier and give you a graceful exit from the dealership. While the salesperson will want to talk numbers after a test drive, you might not be ready, and having another vehicle to look at can give you an easy out.

Step 8: What to look for in a test drive

A car might seem to have all the features you want, but the true test takes place when you are in the driver's seat. You should test-drive the car the way you would drive it during your everyday life.

If you commute, try to find both stop-and-go traffic and highway speeds to approximate your time driving to and from work. If you trek to the mountains, head for a nearby hill to climb so you can test out the engine's power and efficiency. Drive over bumps, take tight corners, and test the brakes in a safe location.

Get in and out of the car several times, and be sure to sit in the back seat, especially if you're going to have passengers. Check out the cargo space. If you plan on using children's car seats, bring yours along to test for fit and ease of installation. Take pictures of the cars so you can reference them later.

While you are evaluating the car, don't be distracted. Take your time looking everything over. A good salesperson will respect your need to experience the car and will let you focus on the driving experience.

Turn off the stereo so you can listen to the engine's sound (or lack thereof in an electric model). When you return to the dealership, you can evaluate the sound system. If the conversation does turn to questions about whether you'd like to talk about purchasing or leasing, you can say that you're still in the test-drive stage.

Step 9: Pick your car

If the choice isn't clear after driving a few different cars, sleep on the decision. If you're still not sure, you might need to take a few steps back and find some more candidates. It's better to take longer in the shopping phase than have buyer's remorse later.

While making the right decision is important, it's also good to realize that there could be many correct answers to the question of choosing a car. Today's vehicles are safer than ever before. They get better gas mileage. They have amenities at a lower cost than in the past. In short, there could be several great cars for you, and the final decision is really a matter of individual taste.

Step 10: Time to buy or lease

Now that you've done research that you hope makes you feel confident you've found the right car for you, it's time to become a car buyer or lessee.

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Prepare now and be road trip-ready

The allure of the open road compels millions of people to get behind the wheel and set off in the direction of new horizons every year. A freedom of adventure is an inherent trait of road trips, and these excursions can be incredible ways to explore the sights. But vehicle preparation is important before taking to the open road.

Vehicle breakdowns can derail a road trip quite quickly. Breakdowns can be costly and are always inconvenient. According to AAA, tire-related issues consistently rank among the top reasons for roadside assistance calls. AAA data also shows battery-related issues account for a significant portion of roadside calls. Here are some key areas to address when preparing a vehicle for a road trip.

Tires, tires, tires: Incorrect tire pressure can affect fuel efficiency and handling. Ensure tires are inflated to the correct PSI as indicated in the driver's side door jamb or in the vehicle's owner's manual. Inspect the tread depth on all tires to ensure it is adequate, and also look for any tire damage like cracks, embedded objects or bulges. While you're checking the tires, make sure the spare is inflated and in good condition.

Battery life: Many automotive centers offer free battery testing. If the battery is between three and five years old, consider having it checked or replaced. Use a wire brush to clean battery terminals of corrosion.

Under the hood: If a road trip is close to the next oil

change, do it before leaving. Ensure that all coolant levels are correct, and that the brake fluid isn't low. Transmission fluid and power steering fluid also should be checked. Refill the wiper fluid reservoir to maintain visibility on the trip.

Belts and hoses: Inspect the belts for cracks and fraying. Check the hoses for leaks and bulges.

Brakes: Brakes are the primary safety system. If the brakes squeal, grind or pulse when you are braking, they may need to be replaced. The same can be said if a visual brake pad inspection indicates the pads are thinning.

Essentials kit: Even with the best preparation, unexpected issues can happen on road trips. That's why it's a good idea to have a kit stocked with jumper cables, a portable air compressor to fill tires, first-aid kit, flashlight with extra batteries, basic tools, flares, water, and non-perishable snacks. A blanket or warm clothing or reflective vest also is helpful.

Documentation: Don't leave home without a driver's license, vehicle registration and proof of insurance. If you are part of a roadside assistance program, keep the contact information and member number handy. While GPS tools on phones and other devices are very efficient, they're only as good as the cellular signal. Paper maps or printed directions are a backup for GPS.

A successful road trip starts with preparation. Ensuring the car or truck is road-ready is very important.

Higher gas prices spur questions about EV growth

EV interest continues to rise as gas prices climb amid the ongoing Iran conflict, with notable gains across both the new and used markets.

The details: Consideration for electric vehicles has been climbing in recent months amid the Iran conflict, with Cars.com reporting a roughly 25% increase in combined new and used EV searches from late February to late March.

Top new EV searches include the Volkswagen ID. Buzz, Chevrolet Equinox EV, Ford Mustang Mach-E, and Chevrolet Silverado EV, with overall new-EV searches up 23.8%.

Tesla dominates used EV searches on Cars.com, led by the Model 3, Model Y, Model S, and Model X, with used-EV searches rising 25.5%.

Hybrid interest also increased, though more modestly, with new hybrid searches

up 12.5% and plug-in hybrid searches up 5% over the same period.

Why it matters: The rise in EV search activity suggests fuel-price volatility is once again pushing more shoppers toward electrified options, creating an opportunity for dealers with the right mix of new and used EV inventory, especially as affordability and incentives continue to shape buyer decisions.

Zooming in: While the top used EV searches track with what Cars.com typically sees, the top new EV searches reflect a broader mix of consumer interest in the current market, according to the platform.

The Volkswagen ID. Buzz's surge in searches likely reflects a combination of heavy dealer discounts as the model winds down—with no return planned for 2027—and broader curiosity about the EV.

Interest in the Chevrolet Equinox EV and Ford Mustang Mach-E follows a similar pattern: both are affordable, mainstream EVs currently available with notable incentives, said Cars.com.

Continued high search volume for the Chevrolet Silverado EV suggests diesel truck owners, facing rising fuel costs, are increasingly considering electric alternatives.

Between the lines: The shift in the EV market goes beyond consideration, with used-EV sales rising across both wholesale and retail channels.

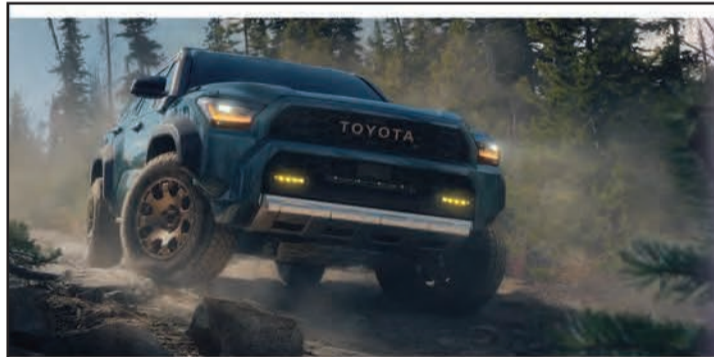
Wholesale EV volume at Manheim hit a record in Q1, with nearly 37,000 units sold.


Analysts estimate that more than 100,000 used EVs were sold in Q1, marking the second-best result ever.

What they're saying: "This surge is likely tied to gas price

anxiety and may not represent a permanent shift on its own," a Cars.com spokesperson told CDG News. "These kinds of spikes tend to occur around periods of oil price volatility and can fade as prices normalize. That said, it's not meaningless; it at least suggests potentially growing consideration of EVs. With a wave of off-lease EVs hitting the used market soon, and data showing most EV owners don't return to gas vehicles, sustained search interest could translate to real volume."


Bottom line: EV interest may be getting a temporary boost from higher gas prices, but it is also reinforcing the importance of being ready for shifts in shopper demand. For dealers, that means paying close attention to EV inventory, pricing, and used-market opportunities as more consumers weigh electrified alternatives.





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Best gas-saving hybrid SUVs for 2026

The best gas-saving hybrid SUV according to Edmunds' ratings is the 2026 Hyundai Tucson Hybrid, which our editors praise for its athletic performance, smooth ride and solid efficiency numbers. There are other good options, and we've divided them into categories of compact hybrid, three-row/midsize hybrid, luxury hybrid and plug-in hybrid SUVs, so you can find a great fuel-efficient utility that's right for your needs and budget. With gas prices on the rise, fuel efficiency is once again top of mind for buyers.

BEST COMPACT HYBRID SUVS

2026 Hyundai Tucson Hybrid

The Tucson Hybrid is not only the best gas-electric compact SUV; it's also our favorite Tucson. Not only does it offer better fuel economy — 38 combined mpg for the base Blue SE trim, 36 mpg for all others — but it's more powerful than its non-hybrid sibling, making it easier to drive in any situation. That's in addition to the standard Tucson's responsive steering, spacious interior, supple ride, and long list of standard tech and driver assist features. And because it's a Hyundai, you get the added peace of mind that comes with one of the best warranties in the business.

Edmunds Rating: 8.8 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$34,050
Fuel economy: 36-38 mpg combined

2026 Kia Sportage Hybrid

The Kia Sportage and the Hyundai Tucson have a lot in common, as they're built on a shared platform and use the same hybrid powertrain. They differ, however, in that the Tucson Hybrid comes standard with all-wheel drive and the Sportage Hybrid uses front-wheel drive, with AWD an option. As a result, the gas-electric Sportage is less expensive to start and gets better fuel economy ratings — 42 combined mpg with front-wheel drive, which drops to 35 mpg if you opt for the all-wheel-drive version. The other big differentiator is the styling of these two; the Hyundai's design is dominated by curvy creased body lines, while the Kia has a more tailored and upright look. Otherwise, these two are pretty similar, down to the warranty coverage. And pricing is even pretty close, with the all-wheel-drive Sportage Hybrid starting at \$34,285, within spitting distance of a comparable Tucson Hybrid.

Edmunds Rating: 8.7 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$31,985
Fuel economy: 35-42 mpg combined

2026 Toyota RAV4

The Toyota RAV4, a national best-seller, got a full redo for 2026 and now comes only as a hybrid or plug-in hybrid. It's more stylish than before, and Toyota's latest raft of standard technology features is welcome. The RAV4 is ranked behind the Sportage and Tucson because of a rougher ride, seats that aren't as comfortable, a bit less rear legroom, and good but not-quite-as-good warranty coverage. Still, the RAV4 is pleasant to drive and its efficiency numbers are the best in the class, maxing out at 44



2026 Hyundai Tucson



2026 Toyota Highlander Hybrid



2026 Lexus NX Hybrid

combined mpg for the front-wheel-drive version, while the all-wheel-drive's numbers aren't far behind.

Edmunds Rating: 8.1 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$33,350
Fuel economy: 38-44 mpg combined

2026 Hyundai Palisade Hybrid

Another SUV that got a full redo for 2026, the Hyundai Palisade is now truly handsome, but more importantly, it's now available as a hybrid. Like the smaller Tucson Hybrid, there's no compromise here; the gas-electric Palisade is quicker than its non-hybrid partner (7.4 seconds to 60 mph compared to 8.8 seconds) and has a much better EPA combined rating (34 mpg for the hybrid's front-wheel-drive Blue trim versus the FWD gas model's 21 mpg). There's a lot more to like, including a smooth ride, an interior that wouldn't feel out of place in a luxury vehicle, tons of room for passengers, and decent cargo space, although it's out-

done there by our next contestant.

Edmunds Rating: 8.3 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$45,760
Fuel economy: 29-34 mpg combined

2026 Toyota Grand Highlander Hybrid

Toyota has been doing hybrids longer than other automakers, and it shows in both the quality and variety of its gas-electric models. In the case of the Grand Highlander, the larger-than-Highlander utility vehicle, Toyota offers two different hybrid powertrains. The more economical hybrid makes 245 horsepower and wins the efficiency crown (36 combined mpg with front-wheel drive, 34 mpg with AWD). Meanwhile, the Hybrid Max powertrain maximizes power (362 hp) and accelerative performance (6.1 seconds to 60 mph) while fuel economy takes a back seat — but not all the way back in the third row. Speaking of, the Grand Highlander is up there with the VW Atlas in terms of

third-row space, and the seat in the Toyota is higher off the floor than in most three-row SUVs, making it more pleasant for adult-sized folks.

Edmunds Rating: 7.8 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$46,505
Fuel economy: 27-36 mpg combined

2025 Toyota Highlander Hybrid

While smaller than the Grand Highlander, the Highlander drives much like its longer sibling and has a very similar feature set. There's no powertrain choice here, however — you get the same basic engine and hybrid system as the less muscular Grand Highlander Hybrid (it's down an insignificant 2 hp here), and unlike the larger three-row it's offered only with all-wheel drive, which explains the Highlander's higher base price and slightly lower max efficiency. But as long as you don't plan on using the third row very often, the plain Highlander Hybrid can be a good pick. Definitely cross-shop the two, though, especially if you don't need all-wheel drive, as the Grand Highlander may make more sense financially while giving you extra space — you know, just in case.

Edmunds Rating: 6.3 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$48,815
Fuel economy: 35 mpg combined

2026 Lexus RX Hybrid

Lexus gives RX buyers the choice of four powertrains, two of which are hybrids that come with standard all-wheel drive. The 350h is the less expensive of the two, yet it's still plenty luxurious, though not a scorching performer. We'd probably skip the more expensive and plentier quick

RX 500h F Sport Performance — yes, it has about 100 hp more than the 350h, but its suspension is on the stiff side of comfortable, some of the F Sport aesthetic touches are a little over the top, and the added power negates much of the efficiency advantage. Whichever one you choose, you'll get a nicely appointed and very comfortable cabin and good room for passengers, all at prices that beat its German competitors.

Edmunds Rating: 6.9 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$54,275
Fuel economy: 27-36 mpg combined

2026 Lexus NX Hybrid

A size down from the Lexus RX is the NX. It's offered with one hybrid powertrain option, dubbed NX 350h. It's the same system you'd get in the RX 350h, although as of the 2026 model year, the NX is now offered with both front- and all-wheel drive; you'll pay more for AWD, of course, but the NX Hybrid's combined fuel economy rating only drops by 1 mpg if you do so. This compact SUV is, not surprisingly, not as spacious as the RX — the interior is small even when compared to the cabins of some competitors — but it's just as well crafted inside and out and comes with a long list of advanced driver aids.

Edmunds Rating: 6.8 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$46,070
Fuel economy: 39-40 mpg combined

2026 Lincoln Nautilus Hybrid

You wouldn't know it by looking, but the Lincoln Nautilus midsize luxury SUV is based on the same platform as the Ford Explorer. Lincoln's clean styling sets the Nautilus

apart from its Ford sibling and the rest of the luxury market, and the Nautilus offers something the Explorer doesn't: a hybrid powertrain. (The current Explorer launched with a gas-electric option that has since been discontinued.) This American take on luxury has substance to go with the style, with a roomy and comfortable interior and available 24-way power-adjustable front seats. We don't love the way the Nautilus Hybrid drives. It's not particularly quick, and the suspension is stiff when it should be compliant and mushy when you'd want tautness. But tempering that somewhat is the inclusion of BlueCruise, Ford's hands-free highway driving system that can whisk you along on long trips with reduced stress.

Edmunds Rating: 6.6 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$58,990
Fuel economy: 30 mpg combined

2026 Mercedes-Benz GLE Plug-in Hybrid

It's not inexpensive, but the Mercedes-Benz GLE 450e plug-in hybrid sure is sweet. Like other GLE models, the 450e has a sublime ride, a beautiful interior, and some of the most polished driver aids — although most cost extra. Its EPA-estimated 23 mpg combined isn't particularly impressive, but consider that this SUV can travel 50 miles on a charge according to the EPA. What's more, in Edmunds' testing, the GLE 450e outdid both numbers, managing 59 electric miles and then returning 28 mpg once the gas engine took over. Transitions between modes are hardly felt, and like a good Mercedes, the 450e's interior is whisper quiet.

Edmunds Rating: 8.0 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$73,600
Fuel economy: 23 mpg combined

2026 Hyundai Tucson Plug-In Hybrid

Back on the more affordable end of the spectrum, the Hyundai Tucson plug-in is more powerful yet slightly less efficient than the standard Tucson Hybrid when using the engine alone, and you'll pay extra for those differences. That said, the plug-in Tucson is rated for 32 miles of electric-only driving with a full charge, and we saw just north of 37 mpg in real-world combined driving once the battery bowed out. It's just as comfy and feature-packed as the other Tucsons, but there is that price difference. Like with any plug-in hybrid, paying extra for the ability to charge only makes sense if you do so regularly, ideally at home and perhaps at work if you have a longer commute.

Edmunds Rating: 7.9 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$41,225
Fuel economy: 35 mpg combined

2026 BMW X5 Plug-in Hybrid

BMW's counterpart to the Mercedes-Benz GLE 450e is its plug-in X5 SUV, which goes by the xDrive50e moniker. If the Benz is the passenger's choice, the X5 plug-in is more for drivers, channeling the athletic responses of its gas-only brethren. And it's quick, at 4.6 seconds to 60 mph in Edmunds' testing. The X5's interior is plenty nice, but some may find its design a bit sterile. Unlike the Mercedes, this BMW offers a hands-free highway driving system as part of the optional Driving Assistance Professional package, and it works well except for the occasional surprise deactivation. Electric-only range is 40 miles according to its EPA estimate. In Edmunds' real-world fuel economy test, the X5 plug-in bested its EPA combined rating by 1 mpg, but that number gets a boost the more you drive on cheaper-than-gas electricity.

Edmunds Rating: 7.4 (out of 10)
Starting price: \$76,375
Fuel economy: 22 mpg combined

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Tips for a safe, fun spring break road trip

Arriving months after the holiday season and right around the end of winter, spring break comes at the perfect time for families and students. A winter spent largely indoors can excite anyone about the prospect of soaking up some sun from the comforts of a sandy beach, and millions will do whatever it takes to make such a trip possible.

Many spring breakers may fly to their destination, but that can be costly for families paying for multiple flights. Indeed, spring break can be one of the more costly times to travel by air, as it's considered a peak travel period. Families who want to get away but don't want to spend thousands of dollars on flights alone can take to the road and drive to their destinations. If a road trip is in the cards, families can consider these strategies to ensure a safe and fun excursion.

Have your vehicle fully serviced before your trip. Winter can be hard on a vehicle, particularly when a car is parked outside in locations where harsh weather is the standard between December and March. A full check-up that tops off fluids, tests the brakes (and replaces them, if necessary), inflates the tires (and again, replaces them, if necessary), tests the battery, and checks headlights and wiper blades to ensure they're operating at peak capacity can prepare a vehicle for the journey to your spring break destination.

Make some pit stops along the way. If it's an especially long trip to your destination, extend your travels by a day or two and make an extra stop along your way to your destination and on your return home. Find a fun activity along the way, such as a trip to a local indoor water park or a must-see hiking spot, so everyone can spend a day moving around before getting back in the car.

Don't be a motorized martyr. When your ultimate destination is a warm, sun-soaked beach, it can be tempting to make the trip in a



single day. But fatigued drivers are dangerous drivers, so it's best to build in some time to take a break and even share driving duty with another licensed driver. Moms and dads can switch halfway through the trip. If you already know the trip will take multiple days on the road, then stop driving no later than sundown to ensure you and your fellow drivers get a

good night's rest.

Line up some in-vehicle entertainment. A long road trip with young children will require some in-vehicle entertainment. Load up a tablet with movies to keep the kids occupied during the drive but also arrange for some non-device game play as well. A book of puzzles, a family sing-along, a round or two

of I spy, the license plate game, and even some kid-friendly trivia can provide some fun distractions on the way to your destination.

The cost of air travel can be prohibitive for families looking to get away this spring break. Some simple strategies can make road trips a safe, fun and cost-effective means to getting away when school lets out this spring.

Small steps to extend a car's life expectancy

Vehicles continue to get more expensive. The automotive experts at Kelley Blue Book indicate the average American car buyer paid \$50,080 for a new vehicle in September 2025, which was the first time the average price for a new car ever topped \$50,000. More drivers are looking for ways to push their current vehicles past the 200,000-mile mark to save money.

According to S&P Global Mobility, the average age of a vehicle on the road hit a record high of 12.8 years in 2025. Although major mechanical failures concern drivers of older vehicles, it's actually much smaller things that can affect vehicle longevity. There are small actions anyone can take to significantly extend a car's life.

Use caution on cold starts. When a vehicle sits,

oil settles at the bottom of the engine. To help combat damage that can occur, drivers can wait about 30 seconds before shifting into gear, as this will allow the oil pump to circulate the lubricant to the upper valve train and help prevent extra wear on the engine. Modern fuel-injected engines warm up faster and more safely by being driven gently rather than sitting still, so it's not necessary to idle for a long while with the vehicle in the driveway, says Smart Motors Toyota. In fact, long idles actually can strip away oil.

Treat fluids wisely. According to EngineeringCivill.org, checking and replacing fluids is cheaper than replacing hardware. Recent data suggests that consistent oil changes can add between 50,000 and 100,000 miles to an engine's lifespan. It's important to follow a vehicle's

manual for time-based intervals for fluid replacement, rather than just going by mileage.

Drive faster on occasion. Oil will never get hot enough to evaporate internal condensation for those who primarily drive short distances under 10 miles. Once every few weeks, it's important for drivers to drive at least 20 minutes at highway speeds to help get rid of contaminants.

Drive smoothly on roads. Aggressive driving will not just burn more gas; such driving also creates heat, which can impact longevity. According to Kia, hard braking generates immense heat that can warp rotors and stress suspension bushings. Likewise, it's key to ease into acceleration. Rapid acceleration forces the transmission to downshift abruptly, increasing wear. Reports from The Zebra, an



insurance shopping company, indicate that mindful driving can reduce mechanical strain by up to 30 percent.

Fight corrosion. Rust can kill a car before the engine actually fails. People who live in areas where roads are treated with salt in the winter should use a winter car wash that includes an undercarriage

spray. Auto Recycling World says road salt can eat through brake lines and fuel lines. In addition, applying a coat of wax twice a year can prevent UV rays and other damage to the clear coat, which protects the metal body from the elements.

Address engine lights promptly. CarMD says ad-

ressing a "check engine" light immediately is 20 percent cheaper than waiting until the vehicle has a driveability issue. For example, ignoring a \$150 oxygen sensor can eventually destroy a \$1,500 catalytic converter.

Small habits can help prolong the longevity of vehicles and help people save money.

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Why now is the perfect time for auto maintenance

Winter weather can be tough on your vehicle — Fresh Season, Fresh Start.

Spring maintenance helps prevent costly repairs, improves fuel efficiency, extends the vehicle lifespan, and increases safety. Taking care of small issues now keeps your car running smoothly all year long.

Check tires & alignment

Wintery weather affects tire pressure, and potholes can throw off alignment.

Inspect for:

- Uneven tread wear
- Low tire pressure
- Vibrations while driving
- Pulling to one side
- Proper alignment improves fuel efficiency and extends tire life.

Assess the battery

Winter strains your battery. As temperatures rise, weak batteries often fail unexpectedly.

Have your vehicle evaluated to avoid getting stranded during spring road trips.

Inspect brakes

Salt, moisture, and temperature changes can affect braking components. If you hear squeaking, grinding, or

feel vibrations when stopping, it is time for an inspection.

Replace wiper blades & check fluids

Spring showers demand clear visibility. Replace worn wiper blades for safer driving in rain.

Check and top off:

- Windshield washer fluid
- Engine oil
- Coolant
- Brake fluid
- Transmission fluid
- Service Your A/C System

Before summer heat arrives, assess your air conditioning system. Weak airflow or warm air could indicate the vehicle has low refrigerant levels or other issues.



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