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A Keeper Is Cheaper

By William Jeanes, July & August 2009

With a little care, your car can last for decades—and save you thousands of dollars

"I miss my car and just want to see it back sitting in my driveway," says Irv Gordon, 68, a retired schoolteacher who lives in East Patchogue, New York. The average car on the road in this country is nine years old and logs 15,000 miles a year. Gordon has driven the sporty red Volvo P1800S he bought back in 1966 a lot more than that—an astounding 2.7 million miles. Just now the car is in the shop. Gordon says he has learned to get the carburetors rebuilt every 900,000 miles, whether they need it or not.

The secret to automotive longevity turns out to be no secret at all: it's maintenance. "Do what needs to be done when it needs to be done," says Gordon. Sounds too simple to be true, doesn't it? Yet in talking to the uncrowned kings of the road for whom a quarter-million miles in a vehicle is just a beginning, the same advice keeps emerging: read the owner's manual and stick to its schedule.

Gordon monitors his Volvo's oil, transmission fluid, and coolant levels, as well as the tire pressure, at almost every fuel stop. He also checks all belts and hoses, replacing them when they show signs of wear. Start paying close attention at 50,000 miles and every 50,000 thereafter, he says.

9.4 Years
The median age of
passenger cars in the
United States, now at
an all-time high
—R. L. Polk & Co.

A lot of trouble? Maybe. But the alternative can be costly, as Pete Biro learned the hard way. A longtime photographer of auto races (he retired about five years ago), Biro, 76, drove well over 200,000 miles in his 1993 Jeep Grand Cherokee while following the off-road racing circuit.

"It's been through rough use on dirt roads, gravel, river crossings, all that," he says. "But I had another Cherokee that I didn't pay attention to, and the engine froze up at 60,000 miles. So I now religiously take it in for service every 3,000 miles. That'll soon be a hundred oil changes."

Keeping your car in shape pays. In fact, you can end up saving more than you spent on it in the first place. Think about it: how much does it really cost to maintain your car? Let's say you drive 50 percent more than the average, or 22,500 miles a year. In five years you'll cover 112,500 miles. In that time you can count on up to 30 oil changes at \$40 each, or \$1,200 spent; miscellaneous service costs (filters, hoses, tire rotation) of, say, another \$1,200; and maybe a major item or two—such as a timing belt replacement, and new brakes and shock absorbers—for as much as \$1,100. That adds up to \$3,500, or \$700 a year.

Now, suppose you bought a new car for \$20,000 and financed \$18,000 at 7 percent for 48 months. That's a \$430 monthly payment, or \$5,160 a year. Why add that to your budget when the cost of holding on to a 5- or 10- or 20-year-old vehicle is just \$700?

Even if the maintenance costs were twice as high, a \$1,400 annual

AND DON'T FORGET...

Check those plastic or rubber "boots" designed to keep grit and grime out of a vehicle's constant-velocity joints. Replacing them will cost far less than replacing the joints themselves.

Replace your timing belt—even though it may be working just fine—when your vehicle nears the 90,000-mile mark. This is far less expensive than

expense still beats those car payments by almost \$3,800—which over five years comes to almost \$19,000. In short, driving a car for five years after it's paid off saves you the equivalent of a new car. Another five years, another new car. And so on.

Rebekah O'Connell has saved this way for a decade. O'Connell, 54, commutes 100 miles a day working as a certified credit and housing counselor in Raleigh, North Carolina. She bought a 1997 Honda Civic when it was two years old and has put 280,000 miles on it. "You can't ignore normal wear and tear," she says. "Spend the money."

As Irv Gordon demonstrates, even an engine rebuild—a \$2,500 to \$5,000 job—can be worthwhile to owners in it for the long run. Gordon estimates this time he'll spend as much as \$5,000 to renew his Volvo, including custom-made pistons that Volvo no longer stocks.

Who's going to baby your car? While it's nice to do it yourself, almost everyone needs a mechanic on occasion. Alvin Elam, 55, of Warrenton, North Carolina, drives a 1992 Toyota Camry with 447,000 miles on it. Alvin, a hospital employee, often buys the oil and oil filter, saving any markup, but he lets a nearby service station do the work.

In choosing a mechanic, you can go to the dealership—which may not be interested in your effort to prolong your car's life—or pick a garage. For recommendations on independent garages, start at the [AAA website](#) or the [Car Talk radio-show website](#). Look for a mechanic certified by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence. The bottom line? A mechanic who becomes a friend will look for signs of trouble before it happens.

For those who turn to a pro, Gordon offers this tip: if your car's sparkling clean, you get better service. "Mechanics don't want to spend any more time than they have to in a car that's filled with trash and sticky with food," he points out. "But take a clean car in for some work and they pay attention."

Gordon should know. His dedication to his own multimillion-mile car led him to a part-time job—in the service department at a Volvo dealership.

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repairing the internal damage to the engine, should it break.

Replace that lost owner's manual. Contact a dealership, or check to see if you can download one for your vehicle at edmunds.com.

Use a product such as Armor All on leather and vinyl surfaces exposed to the sun.

In snowy weather wash your car weekly—and spend the extra buck or two to get the underside washed; that's where the salt is.

