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Getting ready for summer road trips

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Illustrations: Colour Photo: PHOTODISC / Even with the best-laid plans, unforeseen circumstances such as a flat tire can mar a road trip. Be prepared to deal with all eventualities, have the tools available to make such repairs yourself, and travel with a cell phone so you can summon help if you need it.

Colour Photo: COMSTOCK / Use a tire-pressure gauge like the one shown...

Colour Photo: COMSTOCK / ...and keep tires properly inflated.

With winter (hopefully) behind us and summer vacation just a few months away, drivers are starting to think road trips again.

Such trips are an economical way to enjoy the outdoors and visit friends and relatives, but the key to their success is preparation.

Deep down, most people know their cars should be checked out before hitting the road, but studies have shown that a majority of people put it off, thinking that it will take too much time, money and effort. The truth is it takes very little time to determine if the family vehicle is ready for long-distance travel.

To illustrate that point, the Family Road Trip Guide (provided by Car Care Canada online) starts with a 10-minute Road Trip Checkup designed to help Canadians ensure safety and reliability before loading the family into the family's vehicle.

"Planning your road trip may take hours and driving may take days, but getting the car ready for a trip can take as little as 10 minutes," said Kelly Williams, race car driver and Be Car Care Aware spokesperson.

"I always tell motorists to make that 10-minute investment.

"In that short amount of time, they can identify how road-ready their vehicle is and, if necessary, take care of any problems before heading out for a vacation."

Car Care Canada encourages Canadians to view the 10-minute investment as a down payment on safety and convenience. It's really a small sacrifice compared to the inconvenience, cost and potential hazards of breaking down many kilometres away from home.

The Checkup List Includes the Following:

Check all fluids - There are several fluids that require attention, including engine oil, power steering, brake and transmission fluids, and windshield washer solvent and antifreeze/ coolant.

Check hoses and belts - A belt that fails can affect the electrical system, air conditioning and power steering, as well as the cooling system.

Cooling-system hoses may be deteriorating from within, so old hoses and clamps in marginal condition need to be replaced.

Check the tires - Check tire inflation and also inspect the tread for uneven wear (indicating the need for wheel alignment). Also look for bulges and bald spots.

Check lighting - All the exterior and interior lighting should be checked to identify any problems. Car Care Canada vehicle checkup lanes revealed an overall failure rate of more than 25 per cent in the lighting category.

When your vehicle's lighting is defective, other motorists may not get the message that you intend to stop or turn. The end result could be disastrous.

Check the wiper blades and make sure the windshield wipers are working properly - Keep the reservoir filled with solvent. Worn-out wipers should be checked and replaced, if needed, prior to a road trip. As a rule of thumb, wipers should be replaced every six months.

To save on fuel costs and emissions during the trip, the Family Road Trip Guide also suggests that motorists avoid aggressive driving and excessive idling. Motorists are advised to observe the speed limit. Here are some highlights of the recommendations:

- Avoid quick starts and aggressive driving.
- Slow down.
- Use overdrive and cruise control when it's safe to do so.
- Check your tire pressure.
- When highway driving, use air conditioning to reduce drag.
- Preventive maintenance is everything. A poorly maintained vehicle uses up to 50 per cent more fuel to travel the same distance as a well-tuned vehicle.

Visit www.carcarecanada.ca for a direct link to a PDF of the Family Road Trip Guide, which includes tips for saving gas, protecting the environment and ensuring safety, as well as in-car games for kids, meal planning, and the 10-minute Road Trip Checkup.

Be Car Care Aware

Car Care Canada is a non-profit advocacy group that offers research, consumer education and information about the Canadian automotive aftermarket industry. For more than 50 years, Car Care Canada has been working to advance the motoring public's understanding of the vital importance of regular vehicle maintenance and how, by taking a preventive approach to vehicle care and driving habits, motorists can lower their maintenance costs and improve safety.

Be Car Care Aware - a campaign to inform Canadian drivers about the benefits of regular

vehicle care, maintenance and repair - is spearheaded by Car Care Canada and is built around three key themes: safety, environmental protection, and maximizing value for money spent on vehicle maintenance and repairs.

Car Care Canada