

UNDER THE HOOD SERVICES – I

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Question: I just bought my first car. How often I should be checking under the hood?

Answer: It's not as vital as it used to be, but it's still very important to check under the hood at least once a month. It can save you a lot of money. When I was a kid, every gas station fill up came with the offer to check under the hood. But, as self service gas stations are now the norm, you need to check yourself or have someone check for you.

I recommend you carry a roll of paper towels and either a pair of old gloves or a box of disposable nitrile mechanic's gloves somewhere on board. That'll keep your hands dirt and oil free and help clean up any drips or spills on the engine. Then, make sure the engine is off. You don't want your hand or a piece of clothing getting caught by a fan belt. That can really ruin your day.

Then, here's a list of things to periodically check under the hood:

- Engine Oil Level
- Power Steering Fluid Level
- Coolant level
- Belts and Hoses
- Transmission Fluid
- Battery
- Windshield Wiper Fluid
- Brake Fluid

Let's step through how you should perform some of these checks:

Engine Oil. First, make sure the engine is off. Then find the engine oil dipstick - on Ford vehicles, it has a yellow handle – and pull it out. Using a paper towel or rag, wipe it off and look for the markings on the far end of the dipstick. You'll probably see a mark that says "Full" and another that says "Add." Push the dipstick back in place – all the way down and pull it back out to check the oil level. At this point, I always smell the oil on the stick and look at its condition. Don't add any oil unless the reading is below the "Add" mark. If the oil is at the "Add" mark, the engine is one quart low. Add one quart as soon as you can and, after a few moments, check the level using the above procedure again. But, remember this, it is important that you never add so much oil that the level is above the "Full" mark. To do so could damage the engine. If you notice that you have to add oil frequently or that the oil is foamy looking or smells strongly of gasoline, get it to your repair shop as soon as possible. You'll save a lot of money.

Power Steering Fluid. Again, with the engine off, find the plastic cap that indicates "power steering fluid." The cap will generally have a small dip stick attached to it. Remove the cap and check the reading. The fluid level is easily read on the dipstick and should never vary. If you have to add fluid more than once a year, you probably have a leak somewhere in the system – very common in our cold sub-arctic environment. See your repair shop as soon as possible.

The power steering fluid also lubricates the pump and running low can damage or destroy the pump very quickly. Another tipoff of a power steering fluid leak is a howling or grinding noise coming from under the hood when the steering wheel is slowly turned from side to side.

OK. We've run out of space this week. Save this column and next week we'll step through how to perform more of the recommended periodic checks under the hood of your car or truck. See you then!