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Car maintenance the right way, part 1: Avoiding unnecessary work

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Blindly letting a mechanic perform maintenance on your car or truck can easily leave you overpaying. A recent case involving one of our staffers is a good illustration.

The staffer brought his 2005 Sienna minivan to a Toyota dealership for 60,000-mile service and ended up paying much more than he should have.



Some routine work is overkill.

The Toyota service manual recommended only an oil change, tire rotation, and replacing the engine and cabin air filters (along with the usual litany of items to inspect, including brakes, fuel lines, gas cap gasket, steering gear box, and so on.)

We did some research and found that he could have paid around \$150 for the entire job, about two thirds of that if he did most of the work himself. Instead, the bill came to \$382.

Why? The dealer performed unnecessary procedures or replicated work it had done recently.

One big mistake our staffer made was not asking in advance for the list of work that would be done. Here are some examples of why his bill was unreasonably high. (In most cases, the listed prices are for parts only and don't include the additional charge for labor.)

- Replacing the cabin air filter. \$26.95. The same dealer had replaced the filter a year earlier. It's task that needs to be done only every 30,000 miles or 3 years, according to Toyota. And it's an easy do-it-yourself job. Incidentally, we found the filter online for \$17.46, including shipping.
- Replacing windshield wipers. \$24.90. The staffer had replaced the wipers about six months earlier for about \$10 at Walmart.

- Rotating and rebalancing the tires. We don't know how much the dealer charged for this because it was included in the labor cost. But the same dealer rotated and rebalanced those very tires three months earlier and two months before that. Also, the tires were worn out. The staffer replaced them less than two months later
- Replacing spark plugs. \$26.95. Toyota doesn't recommend this for another 60,000 miles.
- Replacing the transmission fluid. \$22.78 Toyota doesn't ever recommend changing the transmission fluid under normal driving conditions.
- Flushing and refilling the coolant, included in the labor charge. This service wasn't needed for another 40,000 miles.
- Replacing PCV valve. \$8.95. This item, which we found online for \$6.35, doesn't ever need to be replaced under the Toyota recommended service.



It doesn't have to cost so much.

In our [next Consumer Reports Money blog](#), we'll tell you how to deal with the shop to ensure you're not overpaying.

Car maintenance the right way, part 2: Dealing with the shop

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Telling an auto shop that you want to do scheduled maintenance is like putting a sucker sign on your chest. You're begging to be overcharged, and [as my previous blog shows, you likely will be](#).

Here's what you should do instead:

- Check the vehicle owner's manual for the recommended maintenance and get estimates from several reliable shops for items you can't do yourself. (You don't have to use a dealer for maintenance, even if the vehicle is under warranty.)
- Make sure none of the procedures already have been done, by the same shop or another one. For example, if you recently bought new tires, you don't need to have them rotated, even if that's what the manufacturer recommends based on

the age of your vehicle. (That's why it's important to keep records of any work that's been completed.)

- Never authorize service without knowing what will be done and what it will cost. If a mechanic recommends service that's not listed in the owner's manual, find out why. Sometimes automakers issue technical service bulletins that add or accelerate procedures. But most likely the mechanic simply is trying to pad the bill with unnecessary work. In the case of one of our staffers who [overpaid for maintenance](#), the dealer tried to sell him an expensive \$100 service that eliminates mildew from the air conditioner evaporator case, a problem our staffer wasn't experiencing and therefore declined. Another unnecessary service we see mechanics recommending is flushing the automatic transmission.
- Unless your car use meets the definition of "special operating conditions," don't let a mechanic talk you into using the more aggressive list of maintenance recommendations, such as those for vehicles driven off-road, short distances, or while towing.
- Don't pay a shop to inspect your vehicle for needed repairs. The mechanic essentially is prospecting for work, and you shouldn't have to pay for that. Many shops offer free inspections.—*Anthony Giorgianni*