

Towing this summer? Make sure your vehicle's up to the task



Hitching a boat-trailer or camper to a vehicle not only dramatically increases the work load placed on its engine, transmission, suspension and brakes, but it is expected to cope with these additional burdens during the heat of summer, often on roads made busy by holiday weekend travelers.

To be safe, rather than sorry, and ensure you arrive at your summer destination you need to know your vehicle is up to the towing task you're asking of it and that it has been properly maintained to ensure reliability.

The starting point should be selecting a vehicle that can get the job done.

An underpowered, and even worse, under braked vehicle is an accident waiting to happen, and so is a vehicle whose suspension isn't up to the job of delivering stability while towing. Vehicle, trailer and RV manufacturers have the knowledge to help you choose a suitable vehicle and any special towing option packages you'll need. But often your current vehicle can be upgraded to include these features by fitting aftermarket products such as heavy duty or load-leveling type suspension components, wiring for trailer lighting and brake systems, provisions to mount the correct hitch, and such things as oil and transmission fluid coolers.

Before setting off on a towing holiday, with either a new or older vehicle, however, a full maintenance and inspection should be performed, even if it's a bit ahead of schedule.

An oil and filter change is essential, but the fluid in either manual or automatic transmissions and in the rear end of rear-drive vehicles should also be replaced.

Much of the additional strain of trailer towing is directed at the automatic transmission. Generating heat is one of the unfortunate byproducts of an automatic transmission's operation, and too much of it is one of the leading reasons they develop problems. To help extend fluid life virtually every automatic transmission comes with its own fluid cooler, which is usually incorporated into the engine coolant radiator. This keeps the fluid within a reasonable operating range under ideal conditions, but trailer towing can send temperatures soaring. Changing the fluid regularly, or switching (where possible) to some of the new high tech fluids on the market can help, but what you may need is an auxiliary fluid cooler.



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You can also have a similar type of auxiliary radiator installed to cool your engine's lubricating oil, which can also become overheated and brake down, due to the increased heat generated by trailer towing. Ask an expert about these units.

The cooling system should be pressure checked for leaks and all hoses, connections and fan and water pump drive belts checked. Coolant is often referred to as anti-freeze, but that is only one of its roles. Its chemical makeup prevents corrosion and provides consistent performance at the high temperatures generated by today's engines.

The braking system will be heavily stressed by even a relatively light trailer and should be inspected for both pad and brake shoe wear, but also to detect rusted or damaged mechanical components. Brake lines should be inspected, and brake fluid changed if required. Old brake fluid can contain moisture which can boil in the lines under heavy or extended braking and cause brake failure.

The battery and charging system and the trailer wiring connections should also be looked at. Hot summer weather is actually harder on battery health than the cold of winter. Fitting a heavy duty battery to meet additional lighting loads is often a good idea.

The additional weight of a trailer can put severe loads on a vehicle's suspension so the steering system, shock absorbers/struts and suspension bushings need to be in top shape to ensure control. An inspection will also reveal any damaged or worn suspension components.



Tire condition should obviously be checked, and tires inflated to the recommended pressures. Low tire pressures cause overheating and eventual tire failure, as well as short life and added fuel costs. Unevenly inflated tires can cause the trailer to wander. Look for signs of unusual tread wear, and such things as cuts or cracks in the sidewalls. Needless to say you should carry a spare tire, and the equipment - jack, proper sized lug nut wrench - you need to replace a tire. Lubricate the lug nuts occasionally to ensure they aren't frozen in place with rust.

Filters should also be inspected and if necessary replaced. A dirty air filter can both rob power that's needed to handle the additional strain of towing, but also seriously reduce fuel economy. When you are traveling you may be forced to refuel at rather dubious places, so a fresh fuel filter will keep any dirt from affecting your fuel injection system.

Even lubrication of minor moving parts pays dividends. Under-lubricated and sticky release mechanisms have been known to allow hoods to fly open at highway speeds.



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And don't forget the trailer or camper needs maintenance as well.

Good advice before setting out on the season's first trip is to hook up and check and lubricate all the connections. Then ensure all the running, brake and signal lights are working, and look over the wiring harness for loose connections or dragging wires. Electrical connectors should be treated against corrosion.

Give the trailer's frame a visual once-over, looking for cracks, particularly around suspension mounting points and welds. Keeping the trailer clean and painted will help when it comes to spotting problems. A pre-trip inspection should include making sure the hitch is solidly attached with fasteners correctly torqued and all fittings properly adjusted.