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How to Check Tire Pressure

Find your car's correct tire pressures, measure all four tires accurately with a gauge, adjust them at an air pump, and know what to do when the pressure warning light comes on.

3-day guide · 3 chapters · Self-Directed Learning Framework

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Every guide on this site is produced with the Self-Directed Learning Framework: instead of an article that explains a topic at you, it turns the topic into a structure you work through — each chapter with one outcome, a starting action under twelve minutes, the minimum you actually need to know, a worked example, a checklist, and exercises using your own situation. No filler, no re-reading required.

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Finding the Right Number for Your Car

> **Outcome:** "I know my car's recommended tire pressures, front and rear, and where they come from."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Open the driver's door and look along the door frame for a sticker with tire sizes and pressures. Take a photo of it.

The minimum you need to know

The correct pressure for your tires is set by the car's manufacturer, not by the tire. You'll usually find it on a sticker inside the driver's door frame. On some cars it's inside the fuel filler flap or the glovebox lid, and it's always in the owner's manual. It's given in psi (pounds per square inch), in bar, or both. One bar is about 14.5 psi. Front and rear figures are often different, and many stickers also give a higher figure for when the car is fully loaded. The number moulded into the tire's sidewall is something else: it's the maximum pressure that tire can safely hold. Filling to that figure makes the tire too hard, which gives less grip and a harsher ride. Use the door-frame figure for normal driving and the loaded figure when the car is full of people or luggage. If your car has a spare wheel, its pressure is printed on its own sidewall or in the manual. A space-saver spare often needs much more air than a normal tire.

Worked example

Worked example: the wrong number on the tire. A driver has always filled their tires to 44 psi, the number they saw on the tire sidewall, and wonders why the car feels jittery over bumps. The sticker in the driver's door frame says 33 psi front and 31 psi rear for normal driving, and 36 and 38 when fully loaded. The 44 was the tire's maximum, not the car's recommendation. They write the four figures on a card for the glovebox.

Checklist

- [ ] Pressure sticker found (door frame, fuel flap or glovebox) or figure found in the manual
- [ ] Front and rear figures noted separately
- [ ] Loaded figures noted if the sticker gives them
- [ ] Sidewall maximum recognised as not the target
- [ ] Spare tire's pressure noted, if the car has one

Exercises

1. Write your front, rear and loaded pressures on a card for the glovebox.
2. Convert your figures between psi and bar, so either kind of pump or gauge is usable.
3. Find the maximum pressure on one tire's sidewall and compare it with your car's figure.

Measuring Cold With a Gauge

> **Outcome:** "I can take an accurate pressure reading on all four tires, at the right time, with a gauge."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Unscrew the valve cap on one tire and put it somewhere safe, such as your pocket, so it can't roll away. Look at the valve: that's where the gauge goes.

The minimum you need to know

Tire pressure rises as tires warm up from driving, so a reading taken straight after a drive comes out higher than it really is. Measure cold: before you've driven, or after the car has been parked for about three hours, or after driving no more than a mile or so to a nearby pump. Never let air out of hot tires to bring them down to the recommended figure. Once they cool, they'll be under-inflated. You'll need a tire pressure gauge. A simple pencil or dial gauge, or a digital one, costs little and is usually more trustworthy than a worn gauge on a filling-station hose. Remove the valve cap, press the gauge straight and firmly onto the valve, and read it. A short hiss as you press it on is normal. A continuous hiss means it isn't sealed, so press again more squarely. Take two readings per tire. If they differ, take a third. Then put the cap back on, because it keeps dirt and moisture out of the valve. Check all four tires, plus the spare a few times a year.

Worked example

Worked example: a reading that was too high. Someone checks their tires right after a 40-minute motorway drive and finds 35 psi all round, above the recommended 33. They're about to let some air out, then remember the cold rule. The next morning, before driving, the same gauge reads 32 on three tires and 28 on the front left. The motorway reading had hidden a tire that was 5 psi low, and letting air out would have made it worse.

Checklist

- [ ] Measured cold: before driving, or after about three hours parked
- [ ] Gauge pressed straight onto the valve until the hiss stops
- [ ] Two matching readings taken on each tire
- [ ] Valve caps put back on every tire
- [ ] Any tire noticeably lower than the others noted

Exercises

1. Check all four tires before your first drive of the day and write down the readings.
2. Check one tire again after a 20-minute drive and compare the two readings.
3. Set a monthly calendar reminder for the check.

Adding Air and Understanding the Warning Light

> **Outcome:** "I can bring each tire to the right pressure at an air pump, release air if it's too high, and respond correctly to the tire pressure warning light."

Micro-start (under 12 minutes)

Find the nearest filling station with an air pump and check whether it's free or coin-operated, and whether it shows psi, bar or both.

The minimum you need to know

Air pumps let you set the target pressure or show a reading as you fill. Either way, add air in short bursts and check with your own gauge between bursts, since pump gauges are often less accurate. If you overshoot, release a little air by pressing the small pin in the centre of the valve with the back of your gauge or a fingernail, then measure again. If you drove a mile or two to the pump, the tires are slightly warm. Aim for 1 or 2 psi above your target and check again cold the next morning. Pressure also changes with the weather. A common rule of thumb is about 1 psi for every 10°F (roughly 0.07 bar per 5–6°C) the temperature drops, which is why warning lights often come on during the first cold morning of autumn. Most modern cars have a tire pressure monitoring system (TPMS). In the US, it must warn you when a tire is 25% or more below the recommended pressure, so by the time it lights up the tire is already well under. A steady light means check all tires with a gauge and inflate them. A flashing light that then stays on usually signals a fault with the system itself, which needs a garage. A tire that keeps losing pressure faster than the others has a leak and needs a repair, not repeated top-ups.

Worked example

Worked example: the first cold morning. On the first frosty morning in October, a driver's tire pressure warning light comes on. With their own gauge they find all four tires 3 to 4 psi under the 33 recommended, and none of them flat. They drive half a mile to the filling station, add air in short bursts to 34 psi, allowing a little for the tires having warmed slightly on the way, and check each tire with their gauge. The light goes off after a short drive. A week later they check again, and all four are holding, so there's no leak.

Checklist

- [ ] Air added in short bursts, checked with your own gauge in between
- [ ] Overshoot corrected by pressing the valve pin briefly
- [ ] Small allowance made if the tires were warm from driving to the pump
- [ ] Warning light treated as 'check all four now', not as 'one tire is flat'
- [ ] Any tire that keeps losing pressure faster than the others taken in for a repair

Exercises

1. Bring one tire 2 psi above target, then release air back to the exact figure.
2. Find out whether your car has TPMS and how to reset it, from the manual.
3. Re-check your pressures on the first cold morning of the season.

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