

Five simple steps to cut down on gas costs

Written by John Felmy
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Gas prices are rising across the country -- and the primary reason is the cost of making fuel. While both supply and demand for gasoline have risen in the United States, the worldwide demand for crude oil is up and the supply of crude oil is down. Middle East turmoil and loss of supply have further tightened markets. The increased crude oil costs and higher mandates for ethanol have made gasoline more expensive to make.

Fortunately, there are some simple steps that you can take to offset higher gas prices and keep more money in your wallet. Here are five of them:

1. Drive slower.

Driving at high speeds makes your engine run at more revolutions per minute -- and consume more fuel. And when your car is traveling faster, it's also facing greater air resistance, which requires the engine to work harder. So don't floor the accelerator unless it's an emergency. Driving 55 miles per hour instead of 65 miles per hour can improve your car's fuel economy by about 2 miles per gallon.

2. Avoid abrupt stops and starts.

The herky-jerky trips most commuters are familiar with don't just give us headaches -- they also cost us fuel. Starting from a full stop is a particularly energy-intensive activity for an engine. And the extra gas each rev-up costs quickly adds up to a much bigger bill at the pump.

So try to make your car rides as smooth as possible. Use back roads to avoid lights and traffic jams. Keep an ample distance between you and the car in front of you to avoid unnecessary braking and accelerating.

When approaching a red light, try to slow down gradually to avoid a full stop before speeding back up again. And when you're at a full stop, don't gun it after the light turns green -- gradual starts can use up to 40 percent less gas than abrupt ones.

3. Don't overuse your air conditioner.

A vehicle's air conditioner works by compressing a cooling agent. That process requires energy. And in a car, that source of energy is the fuel in your tank.

On a blistering summer day, of course, it's fine to turn on the air conditioner. But once you've cooled down, don't keep the inside of your car at refrigerator-low temperatures. Overusing the air conditioner can reduce a car's fuel economy by up to two miles per gallon.

When it's a nice day, roll down the windows. And make a point to park in the shade.

4. Plan your trips in advance.

Taking a series of short trips instead of a single long one can put many extra miles on an engine. Plan ahead to combine errands and cut down on short trips. Pick the kids up from school, buy groceries, and drop a package off at the post office in one trip instead of three.

And consider carpooling. When you share a ride you aren't just splitting gas costs -- you're also cutting down on expenses like insurance and taxes and helping the environment.

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5. Maintain your car.

Too many American drivers don't get their vehicle the regular tune-ups it requires. Properly maintaining your car can dramatically cut down on gas consumption and save you money.

For example, properly inflated tires can improve fuel efficiency by up to 3 percent. When tires start losing pressure, the engine has a tougher time pushing the car forward -- and thus consumes more gas. The average vehicle on the road right now has its tires under-inflated by over 7 percent, which can cause about a 3 percent loss in fuel economy.

Removing excess weight in the cabin or trunk of the vehicle will also improve fuel efficiency. Simply removing this load can reduce fuel consumption and help to lower emissions.

Gas prices could continue to rise over the next few months. But even if they don't, these five simple steps will help you reduce your fuel consumption -- and conserve your cash.

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