



TETRA TECH, INC.

Car Care and Your Water: What's the Connection?

Your car and how well you maintain it have a significant impact on the lakes and streams near you. Cars carry many different hazardous fluids and require natural resources to run. How efficiently or inefficiently our cars use these resources and carry these fluids has a direct impact on our environment. When a vehicle is poorly maintained, and the maintenance activities are carelessly conducted, chemicals may spill or drip onto the pavement and, eventually, are carried by snow melt or rain into our streams and lakes. A well-maintained vehicle uses less gasoline and runs more efficiently without dripping chemicals onto the pavement or spewing excess exhaust into the air. Follow these simple guidelines to reduce the impact your car has on our streams, lakes and rivers – and save yourself money, too!

Car washing

While washing your car, the water collects soap, detergents, residues from exhaust fumes, gasoline and motor oils. Eventually, the water washes off the car and onto the pavement, collecting additional debris and pollutants before flowing down to the nearest storm drain. Unlike the treated water that comes out of a faucet in your home or at work, water that goes into storm drains flows directly to the lakes and streams near you with everything it has collected along the way!

TIP: Use water friendly soaps!

Many commercial grade soaps contain non-biodegradable detergents and acids. If you wash your car at home, try buying soaps that are labeled “non-toxic”, “phosphate-free”, or “biodegradable”. The safest products for the environment are vegetable-based or citrus-based soaps.

Car Soap Recipe

*1/4 cup vegetable oil-based liquid soap
(such as Dr. Bronner's or Murphy's)*

1 gallon warm water

TIP: Prevent the water from reaching the storm drain!

Minimize the amount of water running into a storm drain by washing your car on the lawn instead of the driveway. This will not only give your lawn a watering, but the grass and soil will naturally filter out some of the harmful chemicals or fluids. Remember, whenever possible, shut off the hose to prevent wasting water.

Car fluids

Vehicle fluids include any fluid normally used during operation, such as engine oil, transmission fluid, power steering fluid, brake fluid, and radiator fluid. When these fluids leak or drip out of the car onto the pavement or are improperly disposed, even in small amounts, they eventually run off into storm drains, lakes, and streams where they can contaminate water supplies and kill fish and other aquatic life. In some cases, if a drinking water supply is contaminated, it can be costly to correct and poses a health risk to humans. The cost to treat this contaminated water is passed onto consumers. If your drinking water is supplied by a well, the possibility of contamination may even be greater. Proper vehicle maintenance and good housekeeping when conducting vehicle maintenance activities can help protect your water resources and your wallet, too.

TIP: Check for leaks!

Have your vehicle checked for leaks at least once every three months. If you change your own oil, be sure to dispose of the used motor oil at an oil recycling center and not on the ground or down a storm drain. Many facilities that sell and change oil will accept your used oil, including quick lubes, Wal-Mart and Murray's Auto Center. Call your local businesses to find the most convenient place for you to dispose of your used fluids properly.

TIP: Clean up spills!

It is always a good idea to use an oil pan when working on your vehicle to prevent accidental spills. If you do spill, pour cat litter, sawdust, or cornmeal to absorb the spilled materials. Let this dry for a few hours and then sweep up the absorbents. If the spill is less than one gallon, place the absorption grains in a heavy-duty garbage bag and dispose with your trash. Otherwise, take the material to your local household hazardous waste drop-off site.

For more information about MDOT's Storm Water Management Plan, check out <http://www.michigan.gov/stormwatermgt>.