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**HEADLINE:** How to squeeze every last mile per gallon out of a tank of gas

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By JAMES F. LOWE

Staff Writer

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**NORTHAMPTON** – Gas prices continue to rise. So how can you get more internal combustion for your buck?

There are lots of strategies for optimizing fuel efficiency without trading your Corolla for a fancy hybrid. But there's no consensus among Pioneer Valley mechanics – or among national automotive researchers, for that matter – about which tricks will really save you money and which aren't worth the trouble.

Check pressure

Most experts cite properly inflated tires as a key component of optimal gas mileage. But even this standard piece of advice has come into question.

A 2001 study by Energy and Environmental Analysis Inc. found that keeping tire pressure at the recommended level can increase a car's fuel efficiency by 2 to 4 percent. Various sources say that underinflated tires decrease fuel efficiency by about 1 percent for every 3 pounds per square inch below their recommended level.

"Most cars like 2 to 3 pounds more, or maybe even 5 pounds more" than the psi listed on the tire sidewalls, said Rad Nutting, owner of Toad's Kin Car Co. in Florence.

The U.S. Department of Energy recommends following the air pressure specifications listed not on the tires themselves but on your car. A sticker spelling out recommended inflations can be found inside the driver's-door jamb, glove box or gas cap cover.

But there are doubters. In 2005 a team from the automotive website Edmunds.com tested six fuel-saving strategies on a 55-mile route in the high desert of California. The group found that variations in tire pressure had a negligible effect on fuel efficiency. They did note, however, that it's important to keep tires properly inflated for safety.

Drive smart

Aggressive driving – including pedal-to-the-metal acceleration and abrupt braking – is also gas-guzzling driving, various studies have shown.

The Edmunds group said "moderate" driving, with slower acceleration and gradual braking, produced average fuel savings of 31 percent compared to aggressive driving. Energy and Environmental Analysis found average savings of 5.2 percent in city driving conditions and 33 percent on the highway.

The fuel-efficiency sweet spot for most cars is around 55 or 60 mph.

"You can assume that each 5 mph you drive over 60 mph is like paying an additional \$0.24 per gallon for gas," the U.S. Department of Energy website advises. That assumes a gas price of \$3.52 per gallon.

Michael Woodard of Ernie's Garage in *Northampton* said that at 55 mph your engine is working half as hard as it would be at 80 mph. He recommends keeping your speedometer under 60 on long-distance trips.

"Granted, it'll take longer, but it'll save on gas," Woodard said.

### Streamline

Aerodynamics have a lot to do with fuel efficiency, said Joe Sacco, owner of Village Auto Service in Amherst. Bike racks and other protrusions create drag and make your engine work that much harder, he said.

Drag is also a factor when you roll down your windows, but the benefits of keeping them closed can be undermined if you crank up the air conditioning.

Consumer Reports found air conditioners cut fuel efficiency by about 10 percent, and recommends leaving the windows down at speeds under 40 mph. Faster than that and drag becomes a real factor, making A/C the more efficient option.

Extra weight, like that outsized sub-woofer in your trunk, can also be a drag. Each additional 100 pounds in the vehicle can cut fuel economy by about 1 percent, according to AAA.

### Maintain

The notion of a tune-up – replacing spark plugs, carburetor, etc. – is a moot point with modern fuel-injected cars. A 2009 study from Oak Ridge National Laboratory found that even replacing a clogged air filter won't improve mileage.

Still, keeping your car in good condition is important. Woodard said changing your oil every 3,000 miles is key because it keeps engine parts moving smoothly and minimizes wear and tear.

### Shop around

Not many drivers need advice on this front, but here are some resources.

One place to find the best gas prices in town is the website [autos.msn.com](http://autos.msn.com), where you can plug in your zip code and find prices within a 40-mile radius. The Gazette publishes a selection of area gas prices as compiled by MSN Auto occasionally in its Briefing section on Page A3.

Gas companies like Exxon Mobil and Shell offer no-annual-fee credit cards with cents-per-gallon rebates.

Two *Springfield*-based gas station chains – Pride and F.L. Roberts – have rewards cards which earn points on gas and other purchases that can be redeemed for discounts at the pump.

Pride customers can take off up to 15 cents per gallon by using both the company's rewards and "instant rollback" cards. Founder Bob Bolduc said the cards are becoming more popular as gas prices rise.

F.L. Roberts customers with a rewards card earn five points for each gallon of gas they buy (and more for doing business with JiffyLube or *Golden Nozzle Car Wash*). With 500 points customers can get a discount of 5 cents per gallon; with 9,000 points the discount is \$1 off per gallon. F.L. Roberts also gives discounts to customers who redeem Big Y supermarket Express Savings coins when they fill up.

Filling your vehicle with the right kind of gasoline is important. Nutting said drivers should avoid ultra-cheap gas with alcohol content over 10 percent, because it contains less of the actual fuel your car needs.

Area mechanics noted there's no need to use higher-octane gas unless your owner's manual specifically calls for it. So-called premium and high-octane fuels don't give engines any extra oomph, said Larry Flynn of Larry's Auto Repair and Diagnostic Service in *Northampton*. "Those are terms that really don't have the same meaning they did years ago," Flynn said.

You have the blessing of the "Car Talk" guys, Tom and Ray Magliozzi, to fill up with regular unleaded.

"If your engine is designed to run on regular gas, there's absolutely no benefit to putting in 'high test,' " they write at cartalk.com. "It pollutes more, it costs more, and doesn't give you any benefit in performance or fuel system cleanliness."

James F. Lowe can be reached at [jlowe@gazettenet.com](mailto:jlowe@gazettenet.com).

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