

No idle improvement to air quality

YOUR ENVIRONMENT, By Lisa Lillelund

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What can you do — that takes less than one second — to reduce pollution and improve the air quality where you live?

How can you reduce the amount of hazardous toxins and smog you put into the air?

The answer?

Stop idling your vehicle engine and you will reduce pollution.

That's right — drivers hold a key to improving air quality.

Many drivers leave their engines running when their vehicles are standing still and they are not in traffic. It's been estimated that American drivers unnecessarily consume over 1-1/2 billion gallons of fuel each year while idling. That idling creates serious amounts of dangerous pollution, which harms our health and our environment. Vehicle exhaust from driving and idling is the leading source of air pollution contributing about 40 to 50 percent of air pollutants.

How does idling cause pollution?

Idling vehicles release smog-forming chemicals, sulfur dioxides, air toxins, poisonous carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, formaldehyde, carbon dioxide and particulate matter. The combustion of fossil fuels releases these hazardous emissions into our air. Ozone, or smog, is one of these pollutants. It forms when sunlight reacts with emissions from trucks and cars. The worst time of year for smog is when temperatures are highest and the amount of sunlight is greatest.

How will my engine perform with reduced idle time in cold weather?

Thanks to new technology in all modern car engines we drive today, it is no longer necessary to warm up the engine for several minutes in cold weather. Turns out that anything over 30 seconds for gasoline-powered cars and SUVs and over a couple of minutes for diesel trucks is actually hard on the engine since idling is not working the engine at peak-operating temperatures. The fuel doesn't undergo complete combustion, leaving spark plugs dirty and contaminating engine oil — according Oregon's Clean Air Action Day Fact Sheet. Low speeds such as idling can cause twice the wear on internal parts. Driving the car is the best way to warm it up the engine in cold weather.

When should I turn off my vehicle engine?

Turns out that anytime your gasoline-powered vehicle will be standing still more than 10 seconds, you should turn your engine off. Idling for over 10 seconds will use more fuel than restarting the engine. For diesel-powered engines idling for over 30 seconds uses more fuel than restarting the engine. Frequent restarting has little effect on engine components, but provides benefits in fuel savings and improved air quality.

What are the effects on our health from unnecessary idling in our vehicles?

According to the Fact Sheet on Engine Idling distributed Portland, Ore., “The smallest pollutants can lodge deeply into the lungs and cause lung damage, aggravate respiratory conditions such as asthma and bronchitis, increase the risk of strokes and heart attacks, lead to cancer, and contribute to premature death.”

In researching this article, I learned the disturbing fact that children have the greatest health risks from idling since they inhale more pollutants than adults do. Children, whose lungs are still developing, breathe more rapidly, about 50 percent more air per pound than adults. Asthma is the most common chronic illness in children and the leading cause of most school absences. The California EPA has reported that the prevalence of asthma in the U.S. has increased more than 75 percent since 1980. Among other problems, carbon monoxide reduces the ability of blood to bring oxygen to body cells and tissues. These chemicals from vehicle emissions impair our lungs and heart, irritate our eyes, and reduce our capacity to work and learn.

Does idling use up much gas?

One hour of idling can burn up to a gallon of gas. A school bus idling up to 60 minutes total each school day can waste around \$550 in annual diesel fuel costs.

Is idling illegal?

Yes. Similar to over 40 other states, Massachusetts has passed an anti-idle law. Chapter 90: Section 16A states: “No person shall cause, suffer, allow or permit the unnecessary operation of the engine of a motor vehicle while said vehicle is stopped for a foreseeable period of time in excess of five minutes.” There are some exceptions, but for most instances it is illegal to idle over five minutes and fines up to \$100 for the first offense can be issued. Now I hope that you won’t idle for more than 30 seconds, but I did want you to know that there is an anti-idle law.

What about school buses and city vehicles such as police patrol cars?

They shouldn't be unnecessarily idling either. It causes pollution, wastes our tax dollars, and is harmful to our health. Diesel exhausts from buses that are idling have higher levels of harmful particulates and carbon than moving buses.

What you can do today for cleaner air:

- Follow the 10-second rule. If you are going to be stopped for more than 10 seconds, except in traffic, turn off your car engine.
- Don't use the drive-thru, or if you must, then turn off the engine if you will be stopped more than 10 seconds.
- Encourage schools to have a no-idle policy. Ask bus drivers and parents picking up and dropping off students at school to turn off their engines when standing still more than 30 seconds.

Spread the word about idling. Talk to your family, friends, and neighbors about the benefits of reduced idling for our air quality and our health.

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