

Can Cars Cause Water Pollution?



We all know that cars cause air pollution. But did you know that cars also cause water pollution? As we drive, our cars and trucks leave bits of tires, brakes and rusty metal on the street. When we park, our cars and trucks

drip stains of oil, grease, and transmission fluid on driveways and parking lots. Less visible are the tiny exhaust particles that gradually settle out of the air or come down with the rain or snow.

Simple Steps to Cleaner Water

1. Recycle Oil

Old motor oil can be reprocessed and used again and again. Just put it in a container with a tight lid such as a plastic jug or metal can. Don't pour anything else in with the oil because contaminated oil cannot be recycled. For the location of an oil collection center near you, check your local sanitation department.

Recycling is the only safe way to get rid of used motor oil. Never use old oil to kill weeds or to oil roads. Oil poured onto the ground can seep into our drinking water. Oil poured down the storm drain ends up in our lakes and streams. The five quarts from your car could create an oil slick the size of two football fields or pollute a million gallons of drinking water.

2. Use Commercial Car Washes

Taking your car to a commercial car wash or spray booth helps protect our lakes and streams. The dirty water from a commercial car wash goes to a wastewater treatment plant. If you wash cars on a paved driveway or parking lot, the dirty water ends up in our lakes and streams. In addition, phosphates in some soaps act like fertilizer. Weeds and algae thrive on a high phosphate diet, making our waterways unattractive for swimming and boating. When they die, they decompose and use up oxygen needed by fish. If you want to wash your car at home, some communities allow you to drive it onto the lawn or a gravel drive where the water will soak into the ground. The soil will filter out most pollutants.

If you are planning a car wash to raise money for charity, team up with a commercial car wash.

3. Keep Your Car Tuned Up

Cars that run smoothly burn less fuel and cause less pollution. A tuned-up car saves you money by using up to 20% less gasoline. Regular tune-ups also reduce the amount of hydrocarbons, nitrous oxides, and other pollutants that come out your car's exhaust pipe. These chemicals pollute our water as well as our air. Hydrocarbons can cause cancer and nitrous oxide is one of the ingredients in acid rain. Acid rain increases the toxicity of other pollutants in street runoff, which adds to the risk of sickness or death for fish and other aquatic life.

4. Repair Leaks

Spots on your driveway or garage floor can mean the engine, transmission or radiator in your car is leaking. Have the leak repaired and clean up the spot using a clay-based cat litter or another absorbent material. Crush the litter into the stain with your foot, then sweep it up and put it in a sealed bag in the trash for disposal. Do not scrub the spot with detergent and wash the dirty water into the street because it will end up in lakes and streams.

5. Recycle Antifreeze

Recycling antifreeze can be a challenge. A few recycling sites now have separate tanks for antifreeze collection. Check with your local gas station or auto repair shop – they may accept used antifreeze.

If your home is connected to a municipal sewer system, you may flush antifreeze down your toilet or laundry tub. If your home has a septic system, flush small amounts (less than a quart a day). Larger amounts may damage the septic system.

What happens to all this “car dirt” when it rains? Rain and melting snow wash auto pollutants off the pavement, down the gutter, and into storm drains. Under these drains are storm sewers – pipes that carry the dirty water to lakes, streams or wetlands.

Even on sunny days, polluted water often flows out of storm sewers. To understand why, take a walk to a small stream in your town. Do you see the mounds of dirty foam? Streaks of blue? An oily sheen?

Antifreeze is very poisonous to people and animals. Because of its sweet taste and smell, antifreeze may attract children, pets or other animals. Drinking only three ounces may kill an adult and even less will kill children or pets.

6. Return Used Batteries

Return your used car or truck battery to the place where you bought it. Other retailers may charge you for disposal. Be careful – old batteries may leak acid. Wear gloves and goggles and put it in a leak-proof container. If you drop it, neutralize any spilled acid with baking soda or lime.

Don't throw old batteries in the trash or bury them – you'll be breaking the law. They contain hazardous chemicals that can leach through the soil and pollute our groundwater.

7. Check Tire Pressure

One of the simplest and cheapest ways to prevent pollution is to keep your tires inflated. For every pound that your tires are under-inflated, your car loses 1% in gas mileage. Properly inflated tires, by reducing the amount of gasoline your car burns, ultimately reduces the amount of polluted exhaust that your car makes. Under-inflated tires also wear out sooner. So check your tire pressure frequently, especially as temperature changes in the fall and spring. Tires lose a pound of pressure for every 10-degree drop in temperature.

8. Use Up Paints, Polishes and Cleaners

Paints, polishes and special cleaners for cars are usually flammable and toxic. Buy only what you need. and donate leftovers to a friend or an auto-repair class. Better yet, take them to a recycling “clean sweep” center.

The foam may come from soapy water that runs down the street when we wash cars in our driveways. The bright blue streams are probably anti-freeze drained from radiators. The oily sheen may come from used motor oil dumped down the storm drain.

You can help stop this kind of pollution. Explain to your family and friends that storm sewers carry water directly to our lakes and streams. They do not connect to wastewater treatment plants.

To dispose of small amounts, leave the container open in a safe place away from children, pets, wildlife and flames. When the liquid is gone and the substance is hard, cap the container and put it in the trash. The potentially toxic ingredients are locked into the hardened material and are less likely to cause pollution. However, burning will release the toxic chemicals. If your community burns trash, ask the public works department how to properly dispose of these materials.

9. Substitute Shoveling for Salt

Salt may be an easy way to get rid of snow and ice, but it pollutes lakes, streams and groundwater. It also kills trees and grass and corrodes auto bodies, metal bridges and buried cables. Shovel your driveway and sidewalk before the snow gets packed down and icy. If the pavement is still slick, use sand or sand mixed with salt. After the snow melts, sweep up the sand to keep it out of storm sewers and waterways.

10. Drive Less

Driving less is the best way to prevent pollution. Most polluted runoff comes from heavily traveled streets and highways. This runoff often contains enough zinc, lead or copper to kill fish and other aquatic life.

Is there a way you could drive less? Could you walk, ride a bike, car pool or take the bus to work? If not every day, once or twice a week? Could you do several errands when you go shopping? Could you work at home one day a week?

Driving seems cheap and convenient, but many costs are hidden in our tax bills. If we paid the full price at the gas pump, a gallon would cost \$4.50 or more.