

Don't let your winter tires feel the heat



Too many drivers are reluctant to make the seasonal switch

GREG WILLIAMS
For Postmedia News

We automotive scribes are always talking about tires. And there is good reason for that.

No matter how expensive the vehicle might be or how loaded with safety systems — from all-wheel drive to traction control — there are only four patches of rubber that hit the road.

And that makes tires one of the most important aspects of a vehicle.

In the fall, we write about the significance of switching summer or all-season tires to ones built to handle winter. When the temperatures routinely dip below 7 C, it is time for softer, more pliable winter tires.

But now that it is late in spring, it is time to switch back to a tire that will give optimal performance in the warmer conditions.

However, according to a new survey commissioned by Goodyear Canada Inc., some Canadians are now leaving their winter tires on year-round.

"Winter tires are a big investment," says Gus Liotta, Goodyear Canada general manager,

from his Toronto office. "But if you leave them on, in fact, you're not getting the most out of your tire or your vehicle."

The survey, completed by Harris Decima, found that while 82 per cent of Canadian drivers do understand their tires have the greatest impact on traction and overall handling, some 40 per cent have not yet swapped their winters for summers.

Further, nearly one third of Canadians never change their tires as they either keep their winter tires on all year (12 per cent) or don't use winter tires at all (18 per cent).

Liotta says keeping winters on too long may lead to damaged rubber, as the cold-weather tires are specifically designed with tread compounds that stay pliable and provide better traction in freezing temperatures, making them susceptible to faster wear in warmer weather and on hot pavement.

"The reason we did the survey is to try to educate the Canadian driver about having the proper tire equipment on their vehicle for whatever kind of driving they're doing, whether it's commuting daily

or driving to the cottage for the weekend," Liotta says.

Alex Karatimus, assistant manager of the 11 St. S.E. Kal Tire store in Calgary, advocates switching from winter to summer rubber when the temperatures start getting above 10 C.

"That being said, everybody's got a time when they think they should best switch," Karatimus says. "But heat's going to kill your winter tires, and that same heat will make your summers work that much better."

For seasonal tire swaps, Karatimus says his shop starts to get busy in the second week of April.

"May is when it really hits the fan," he adds. "You could call any tire shop today and they'd tell you they're swamped."

Karatimus is aware of people leaving their winter tires on year-round. The practice is not something he recommends.

Because a winter tire uses softer compounds, as noted, the sidewall becomes "squirmy" in the heat. Taking a corner at speed in warm weather with a winter tire leads to more roll, and the tire just is not up to the task.

Also, Karatimus says some winter tires (unless specified as high-performance cold weather tires) have a lower speed rating. Running them

for long distances at high summertime driving speeds could lead to a failure.

Depending on the kind of vehicle being driven, a good set of all-season or summer tires should be just the ticket for wet weather driving, too.

A "summer" tire is used on a performance application, such as a sports sedan or a roadster. An all-season tire would make more sense on a family sedan, minivan or CUV. That being said, it really depends on the style of driving one will be doing with their vehicle.

"We have tires to fit every budget," Liotta says of his Goodyear brand. "We have all kinds of tires, but a consumer should do their research online, or talk to a professional — they can best advise on a tire for a particular application."

Regardless of the tires chosen, Karatimus concludes with this advice: "Check the air pressure once a month (keeping them properly inflated increases fuel economy and prolongs tire life — look in the owner's manual of each specific vehicle to determine correct inflation pressure), and take a quick peek at the sidewalls for cuts or bulges (either kind of damage could lead to a blowout).

"There are four points of contact between your car and the road — your tires — pay attention to them."

SUPPLIED
Keeping winter tires on too long can lead to damaged rubber.

Are they all necessary or merely something else to break down?

BRIAN TURNER
Postmedia News

Look at any automaker's website and your mind and eyes will tire from reading through the almost-endless lists of available equipment. But do we really need the latest and greatest doodads? Or can we save some money and our sanity and improve safety with some wiser choices?

I've road-tested more vehicles than I care to count over the years and have listened to thousands of customers wonder aloud why certain accessories or equipment were installed by the manufacturer in the first place. On behalf of them, here are my picks of the best and the worst.

FAILED FEATURES

■ **Touch-screen controls** for audio, navigation or heating and air-conditioning systems. No matter who makes them or what type of vehicle they come in, these are a distraction to read, use and clean. And when the sun shines directly on them, they can't be read. In the night, their multi-coloured glare can reduce our eyes' ability to see in low light. Extra demerit points go to any system without an easy-to-find and use "screen-off" switch, or which default to full intensity whenever the vehicle is restarted.

■ **Infotainment.** This term is becoming so ingrained in our lexicon that my spellchecker didn't red-line it. It refers to the nasty habit of carmakers to jam every distracting web-based

service and smartphone feature they can into their vehicles' audio systems without concern for safety. The solution to this and touch-screens is simple: if the vehicle is in any other gear but park, the touch-screen should be disabled and only voice commands should be accepted.

■ **Lane departure warning systems.** Still only found in higher end units, such as Infiniti, Acura and most recently Cadillac, these units use side-mounted cameras to determine exactly where the lane marker lines are and where the vehicle is in relation to those lines. If the vehicle strays over these lines without the turn signals being activated, the response, depending on the manufacturer, will range from an audible warning beep to driver's seat vibrations to the brakes being lightly activated on one side of the vehicle to gently bring it back to the centre of its lane. This system is easily defeated by a very common condition on our highways and roads: poorly maintained and faded lane markers or snow-covered roads. If you get accustomed to this feature and start to rely on it too much, you'll be in for a rude awakening when it lets you drift into a ditch because the white lines on the road needed painting or were covered in snow or mud.

■ **Self-parking cars.** This is more of a problem with the drivers than the feature. If you really need this system to help you park your compact, then we, the reasonably intelligent and conscientious rest of the masses, really don't need you



It's a no-brainer: having hands-free cellphone connectivity is an automotive necessity these days.

on the road with us.

MUST-HAVES

■ **Hands-free cellphone connectivity.** This one is a no-brainer. Almost every household has at least one cellphone and almost every jurisdiction has laws prohibiting hands-on use of such phones while driving. So if it doesn't come with a hands-free system, either demand one be installed or choose another vehicle.

■ **Tilt-telescoping steering wheels.** Unless you will be the only driver of the vehicle in question, having this feature means that other drivers of varying heights and arm lengths will be able to properly adjust the seat and reach the pedals.

■ **Anti-lock brakes and electronic stability control.** These systems have demonstrated their ability to reduce collisions in spades. The U.S. National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration confirmed a 2004 study showing a 35 per cent reduction in collisions thanks to ESC. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety claims that ESC can reduce fatal single-vehicle rollovers by a whopping 77 per cent. ESC works in conjunction with anti-lock brakes and various sensors to apply individual wheel brakes and reduce engine power when a vehicle rollover or spin-out is imminent. The only downside with anti-lock brakes is the habit of drivers to lock their hands motionless on the steering wheel

in a panic stop. ABS's main advantage is that it allows a driver to maintain steering control in these circumstances. I've always suggested that drivers try out their ABS feature on an empty snow-covered parking lot to learn how to steer in a panic stop. Maybe carmakers could find room on the instrument cluster for a large-font illuminated word "STEER" that would light up whenever the ABS was activated.

■ **Nissan Tire Easy Fill.** This won't be out until 2013 in the Altima, but Nissan has managed to turn one of today's biggest auto annoyances into a real valued feature. Tire pressure warning lights have quickly eclipsed the "check engine" light as the biggest headache for drivers. Nissan

has turned this around by incorporating a nifty feedback system when adding air to a tire. If your instrument panel indicates a low tire, the Nissan system will specify which tire is low. Then when you add air, the signal lamp nearest to that tire will flash to indicate air is being added and the horn will chirp once when the proper pressure is reached. If you add too much air, the signal lamp will flash rapidly and the horn will chirp three times. No more need to carry a pressure gauge or depend on gas station pump readouts.

Do you have a favourite feature for the hit-or-miss list? I'll be happy to print the best of the best and worst. Write to me at bjoeturner@

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