

BUYING A USED CAR CHECKLIST

UNDER MANUFACTURER WARRANTY?

Start here. Is the vehicle you're considering to purchase still under manufacturer's original warranty, a vehicle protection plan or a vehicle service contract that is transferrable to a new owner?

- If so, great! Your risk is lower for buying a used vehicle if there is some kind of transferrable service agreement in place at the time you buy the vehicle.
- If not, after checking the list below and before buying the vehicle, you will want to make sure it is eligible for a vehicle protection plan from **autopom!**

VEHICLE HISTORY REPORT

One of the first things you should do before purchasing a used car is obtain a vehicle history report. Although these reports can give no guarantees and are not 100% accurate, they can tell you a lot about the car's past. All you need is the V.I.N. (Vehicle Identification Number). Two sources for this are CarFax.com and AutoCheck.com. You can find out information such as:

- Has the car been in an accident? Has there been structural damage? Was it salvaged or rebuilt?
- Has there been any flood or water damage?
- Has the vehicle met emissions inspection standards?
- Is there a lien against the car? If so, the car cannot be sold and ownership cannot be transferred.
- How was the car used? Was it a personal vehicle, taxi, rental, lease, company car, etc?
- What was the last reported odometer reading? Has there been any indication of odometer rollback?
- When was the vehicle purchased and how many previous owners have there been?
- Has the air bag ever been deployed?
- Have any recalls been issued? Have they been fixed?
- Is there any warranty or remaining coverage.

Not all accidents are reported and not all repairs are documented, so history reports should not replace careful inspection and proper research.

DO SOME ONLINE RESEARCH

A little information and knowledge can go a long way when purchasing a used car, and can save you a great deal of trouble in the long run.

- Are there any issues specific to the make and model you are considering? Many vehicle manufacturers over the years have had problems with some models having defects or even recalls. When you find the used vehicle of your choice, do a little research and make sure it doesn't have any important safety recalls.
- Check owner's reviews. Previous owners often give the best feedback about the important issues.
- Check websites like autotrader.com and cars.com to compare prices for similar cars with similar mileage. Purchase price can vary depending on where you buy the vehicle, but remember to consider all aspects of the car when determining cost fairness. A vehicle with lower mileage that is in exceptional condition and has been well maintained may be worth a few extra dollars.

ENGINE

- The first issue that you should address is the engine, and in particular, the engine oil. Make a visual inspection to see if there are any obvious oil or coolant leaks. When you open the hood, make sure that there is not a burnt oil smell, as this can indicate leaking oil lines or a more serious engine issue.
- Ask the dealership or prior owner for service records providing evidence of regular oil changes and maintenance.
- Visually inspect the oil dipstick. Is it at the proper level? Does the oil on the dipstick appear clean and fresh or dark and old? Milky or sludgy oil can indicate poor maintenance or be a sign of more serious engine problems.
- Remove the oil cap and visually inspect it. Are there any dark, sooty deposits or sludge-like material present? If so, this could indicate a lack of proper or regular maintenance.
- Visually check for coolant leaks. If you find any – exercise caution; ask questions.

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- Start the engine. It should start easily, even from a cold start. The engine should run quietly and have a consistent, smooth idle speed.
- Check the engine exhaust. Is the exhaust visual? It shouldn't be, so walk away if it is. Blue smoke could indicate that the engine is worn or uses oil. Black smoke is a sign of excessive fuel consumption.
- Check for loose, dirty, or corroded battery terminals.
- Check condition of hoses and belts. Check for cracking, fraying, leaks, and proper tension. This is a good indication of how well the car has been maintained and the additional cost of replacing any hoses or belts should be considered in the purchase price of the car.

AUTOMATIC TRANSMISSION

- Check the transmission fluid. It should be clear and clean. A burnt smell, low level, or dirty color could mean an internal problem with the transmission.
- Check for delayed engagement. When you put the vehicle in drive, it should engage easily and smoothly without jerking or lunging. It should tend to creep forward when you take your foot off the brake. Check the reverse gear in the same way. A delay between the moment of shifting and the moment the transmission engages could mean that the transmission is worn or indicate a potential problem that could be very costly to repair.
- Accelerate through the gears. Is there a smooth delivery of power? Again, the vehicle should not jerk or lunge between gears, but should shift smoothly. Slow shifting could be a sign of low transmission fluid, leaks, neglect, or wear. Identifying the problem could help you decide to purchase or walk away.

MANUAL TRANSMISSION

- Check for signs of a wearing clutch. Does the clutch slip, stick, or emit a burning smell or smoke? If so, it probably will need to be replaced, which can be very costly.
- Drive in each gear. The gears should shift smoothly and easily without jerks, shudders, or grinding.
- Depress the clutch and brake to check free play and proper resistance.

EXTERIOR OF CAR

- Observe the general appearance of the car to get an idea of how well it has been taken care of and maintained.
- Check for scratches, dents, or excessive rust. A lot of rust could mean that other components such as brake and fuel lines could also be corroded.
- Look for signs of prior damage or evidence of a previous accident. Check carefully for such things as overspray, tape lines, ripples, sanding marks, runs, and peeling, cracked, chipped, or mismatched paint. These things likely mean that the car has had body work and you should make further inquiries.
- If the car has had previous damage, you need to check and see whether it has been repaired correctly. Find out what materials were used. Take a magnet with you and use it to determine if repairs were made with metal plates or just filler.
- Inquire about frame or structural damage. A history report may provide this information or you could take the vehicle to a licensed mechanic. This is especially important if you know the car has been involved in an accident.
- Check for leaks or puddles underneath the car. Transmission fluid is usually pink, oil is brown or black, antifreeze is green, and brake fluid is generally clear. If you find any leaks, investigate the source and determine the cost of repair before making a decision on purchasing the vehicle.
- Check the tires. Tires are expensive so you will need to consider the cost if they are worn and need to be replaced. Tread depth will tell you how much mileage is left. Also, check for uneven wear, which is a sign of alignment problems or broken belts.

INTERIOR OF CAR

- The condition of the interior indicates how well the car has been taken care of and maintained. Check for tears, stains, cigarette burns, or other damage.
- Check all seat belts and make sure they work properly.
- Check the locks. Make sure all power locks work and that the key works in every door as well as the trunk.

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- Check windows. Do they roll up and down easily? Do power switches work properly?
- Do the doors, hood, and trunk open and close properly?
- Make sure the spare tire and tools are present and in good shape.
- Check all the gauges and warning lights. If the "Check Engine" or "ABS" light is on, make sure to investigate further to avoid trouble later.
- Check function of the wipers, stereo and cd player, heat, cruise control, lights, directional indicators.
- Ask if the airbags have been deployed. If so, find out why and make sure they have been replaced. Some areas require that airbags be replaced by specially licensed facilities or dealerships and that vehicles have a safety following any airbag repairs.
- Does the mileage match the condition of the car? Does it seem reasonable or could there be possible odometer rollback?
- Is there a musty odor? This could be a sign of leaks or possible water or flood damage.
- Is the current owner a smoker? Does the vehicle smell like smoke? Has air freshener been used in the vehicle? This could be masking other odors.
- Know your vehicle's history and be prepared to show any necessary documentation (such as a CarFax or recent maintenance records)

CHECK FOR FLOOD DAMAGE

Another thing to consider is whether the vehicle has had water damage in the past. Even though the car may seem fine, water can get inside many of the components and continue to corrode circuits and connections for years to come, causing several ongoing, costly problems.

- Check for musty or mildew odor and water stains on the seats, roof liner, door covers, or around rear window and ledge.
- Look for moisture or mold under carpet and lift floor mats to check for stains or excessive wetness.
- Check for corrosion of metal parts under the seats.
- Check stereo speakers, particularly any in doors, for water damage.

TEST DRIVE CHECKLIST

- Does the vehicle start easily? There should not be any smoke on start-up. If there is, you should walk away as this is an indication of engine problems.
- Are there any vibrations, rattles, or unusual noises while driving? Does the engine run smoothly or sound rough and noisy?
- Does the car accelerate smoothly without hesitation, jerking, or lunging?
- Is the steering responsive? Is the steering wheel on center when driving straight?
- Check the brakes. Do they squeal or make noise when braking? Do the brakes grab, seem soft and spongy, or pulsate? Having to push the pedal too far to the floor could be a sign of low fluid or a need for brake work.
- Does the car shift smoothly? Rough shifting or delayed engagement could indicate transmission problems.
- Does the car sound loud or make buzzing and grinding noises? This could mean the bearings need to be replaced. Knocking, creaking, popping, swaying or bouncing is a sign that the car needs suspension work.
- When driving down a straight road, does the car pull to the side? If so, you should check for the reason why. Pulling to one side could indicate alignment, tire, or brake problems.
- Check the odometer to make sure it is working properly.
- Check all electronic functions such as warning lights, cruise control, air conditioning, heat, stereo, and gauges.
- Make sure the horn works.
- Check the glove box for the owner's manual.

BEFORE YOU BUY

- Choose a trustworthy dealer. Check out the reviews and reputation of the dealer before you make a purchase. If buying from a private seller, be sure to inspect the car thoroughly or have a licensed mechanic assess the vehicle before making a decision.

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- Check the title (pink slip) of the vehicle to make sure all is in order. Make sure the ownership and vehicle information on the document match up with the facts.
- Make sure you are getting the best price for the quality of purchase.
- Does the dealership offer service after the sale. Car dealers that offer different services or warranties will give you options to choose from when buying a used car. They will have better quality of used vehicles than a seller that just wants to make the sale and get you out of there. There are some dealers that will offer a mileage guarantee, or will sell you an extended warranty. These types of vehicle dealers carry a much higher quality of previously owned cars. They don't just want to sell you a car, but they want to continue the relationship with the customer beyond the sale.
- Don't forget to ask, is there a transferable vehicle protection plan or vehicle service contract available? When you purchase extended coverage, you will be protecting yourself from getting a lemon. However, be sure to compare the dealer's extended coverage offering to that of a reputable third-party offering such as **autopom!** You can literally save hundreds and sometimes a thousand or more and receive comparable or better coverage. If the answer is no, be sure to ask **autopom!** for a FREE quote.
- If you discover problems with the car, ask what repairs will be included in the price and inquire about additional repair costs. Get any quotes or promises in writing.
- Ask for documentation, service records, and proof of recall work.
- Always see a car during the day. It is hard to identify potential problems in the dark.
- If you are not confident about your ability to perform the items listed in this article, have the car independently inspected. If the seller does not allow this, walk away.

And most importantly, protect yourself and your family by purchasing a vehicle protection plan. This will allow you to get the security and peace of mind you need with the purchase of a used vehicle.