

Garage air pumps fail the tyre pressure test

Motorists could be risking their safety by relying on pressure gauges at petrol stations to keep their tyres correctly inflated, says The AA Motoring Trust, which points out that an absence of any law requiring proper maintenance of air pumps may be a cause of poor performance.

A check of tyre pressure gauges on 53 petrol forecourts and motorway service areas - mostly on holiday routes - found that 40 per cent were inaccurate. The survey also found much of the equipment, and some tyre service areas, to be dirty. A few were dangerously positioned, and virtually all of them were unprotected from the weather.

"Millions of motorists may have been checking their tyre pressures for the first time this year because its the holiday period; but it may not have guaranteed tyre safety for their long drives, says Bert Morris, AA Trust Director.

"Checking tyre pressures is a vital road safety job that most motorists see as a chore. Poorly maintained, grubby air pumps are not what motorists want in a modern petrol forecourt. And if they cannot be sure that air pressures are accurate, this vital road safety check is even more likely to be skipped.

"The quality and quantity of fuel pumped at a petrol station is strictly monitored under trading standards regulations but motorists have no such consumer protection when it comes to pumping tyres." (See notes to editors)

The AA Trust urges forecourt operators to do more to ensure the accuracy of tyre gauge/pumps and to make checking tyres as easy as filling up with fuel. It congratulates those who encourage safety by providing the service free.

"However, motorists have the prime responsibility for tyre safety and they should check pressures of *all* tyres monthly during a fuel stop, making sure that tyres on the same axle have the same pressure. Under- and over-inflated tyres wear out more quickly. Motorists should consider investing around 15 in a retail gauge/pump with an acceptable accuracy; it allows for the all important cold tyre check, and it can pay for itself by helping to prolong tyre life," adds Morris.

Survey findings

Type and accuracy of gauges

- 57 per cent of the pressure gauges were of the newer digital type, which were found to be no more accurate than the older, analogue gauges
- Just over half the gauges tested were accurate to within 5 per cent for a typical tyre pressure of around 30 psi
- More than one in seven (15 per cent) was more than 10 per cent adrift
- All inaccurate readings showed a higher pressure than was correct. Note: pressures quoted in vehicle handbooks, and on pump-side charts are for *cold* tyres. Tyre pressure rises by up to 3 psi once the vehicle has been driven for a while. In the surveys most dangerous case, the true pressure reading of a tyre showing 34 psi on an inaccurate gauge was only 29 psi - around 26 psi when the tyre cooled - roughly 24 per cent under-inflated and at risk from a high-speed blow out
- 58 per cent of sites displayed no tyre pressure chart; of those that did, 54 per cent were out of date (more than six years old)

Location and condition of air pumps

- All garages had an air supply point and most (73 per cent) provided the service free of charge
- Most air pumps were well sited, safely out of the way of fuel pumps
- 10 per cent were signed out of order
- More worrying, another 10 per cent were faulty but the operators were unaware, bringing the total of unusable pumps to around 20 per cent
- 10 per cent were very awkward to access or blocked access to fuel pumps
- Four were dangerous: users checking two of their tyres were forced into the path of traffic leaving the fuel forecourt - two of these were the main exit roads from the service area
- 81 per cent of sites were lit but it would still be difficult to read pressures on some of the handheld gauges at night
- Virtually all sites offered no protection from the weather - not so bad during the longer, drier days of summer but a grim prospect in the darker, wetter conditions of winter
- Most of the equipment that motorists had to handle was dirty

Charging for air

- Most air pumps were free to use - especially on motorway service areas
- Where charges apply, it often requires more than one payment for enough time to complete inflation

- There was welcome evidence that facilities on some service areas are no longer charged for

NOTES TO EDITORS

- Tyre pressure gauges are not regulated under any UK legislation.
- Local Trading Standards Officers (TSOs) could inspect air pumps on garage forecourts but they have no legal powers to force operators to put right any defects. Only forecourt operators are responsible for ensuring that the equipment is in good working order.

Survey methodology

At least two tyres were inflated at pumps on randomly selected petrol forecourts: a normal road wheel tyre, inflated to 28, 30 or 32 psi; and a space saver spare wheel, inflated to 60 psi. The pressures were checked immediately with an accurately calibrated test gauge. After the survey, the test gauge was re-checked against a calibrated gauge and found to be unchanged.

Site owner - if not obvious, the make of fuel on sale was recorded.

Fee - if there was a charge, all five tyres were checked, inflated and the cost recorded.

Type of pump - all digital gauges were of the automatic type where the desired pressure is pre-set and the machine inflates/deflates the tyre to that pressure. All analogue gauges were of the type built into a hand-operated valve, which is used to adjust the pressure manually.

Tyre pressure charts - the car used for the survey was a Rover 75, a model launched in 1999. The chart was deemed out-of-date if the car was not listed.

Illumination - if the gauge was self-illuminated, had an audible signal (digital pumps only), or the site was adequately lit externally, it was considered satisfactory for use at night.

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