Idling Is Not the Way To Go

Idling your vehicle truly gets you nowhere. It increases our dependence on petroleum, reduces the fuel economy of your vehicle, costs you money, produces pollutants, and wastes precious natural resources. Researchers estimate that idling from heavy-duty and light-duty vehicles combined wastes about 6 billion gallons of fuel annually. When you make an effort to turn off your vehicle, you're on track to doing something better for yourself, your wallet, your environment, and your community.

Modern Cars Don't Need To Idle

Advances in vehicle technology have eliminated much of the need for idling, making it easier than ever to avoid. Computerized controls in today's vehicles bring the engine and catalyst up to their operating temperatures more quickly when the vehicle is moving than when it is idling. The catalytic converter that reduces emissions also operates much sooner if the car is driven right away rather than idled. Even on the coldest day, it takes a modern vehicle less than 5 minutes to warm the engine if the car is moving. In contrast, it takes the engine almost twice as long to warm up if the car is merely idling. In moderate weather, the catalytic converter can even maintain its operating temperature and immediately resume emissions reduction if the driver restarts the car for up to 30 minutes after he or she turns off the ignition.

Similarly, today's gasoline and diesel vehicles alike do not suffer damage from turning the key on and off. Starters and batteries are much more durable than people believed they were in the past. In fact, today's owner's manuals, which usually contain information on how to get the best and most economical performance, generally do not recommend idling.

Consider Your Circumstances

Idling can often be avoided, but there are a few circumstances where it is acceptable.

Drive-through lines are a common place for vehicles to idle. If the line at the drive-through restaurant or bank is long, you should consider turning off your car while you wait. Or, you can park and go into the building.

Likewise, when waiting for passengers, consider the weather. If the temperature is moderate, turning off your engine is a good idea. Remembering this point is especially important while waiting to pick up school children, because parents' idling vehicles can reduce air quality. Unnecessary idling around schools can contribute to asthma and other ailments, as children's lungs are more susceptible to damage than adults' bodies.

Unfortunately, there are a few circumstances where idling is unavoidable. You must keep your car running for safety reasons when waiting in traffic jams. Similarly, when it is time for emissions testing of your vehicle, your inspection station may require you to idle so that your engine is up to its operating temperature.

Idling Can Even Be Illegal

As if money wasted and pollution out the tailpipe aren't bad enough, some jurisdictions in the United States have laws against idling of passenger vehicles.

You could actually be subject to a fine if an enforcement officer sees you idling unnecessarily in:

- The District of Columbia
- Hawaii
- Massachusetts
- Maine
- Maryland
- New Jersey
- Rhode Island
- Utah
- Parts of Colorado, Missouri, and New York State.

Clean Cities
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Solutions Do Exist

For consumers, the best technology that can help reduce idling – beyond your own actions – is driving a hybrid vehicle. A hybrid shuts off the engine when stationary, and enables slow movement with the engine off, so there are no emissions from the tailpipe while waiting. As hybrid vehicles gain a larger market share, there could be fewer vehicles that idle unnecessarily.

However, idling as a problem extends beyond consumer vehicles. Reducing idling in a number of community vehicles, such as police cruisers, school buses, taxis, and ambulances, can bring even bigger benefits. While emergency vehicles (ambulances, police cars, and fire engines) are almost always exempt from anti-idling regulations, there is equipment that can be added to these vehicles to prevent idling while providing power and comfort. Ambulances can plug in at hospitals to keep equipment running, police cars can use automatic start-stop devices or supplementary power sources, and school buses can use block heaters to warm the engines to operating temperatures in the morning.

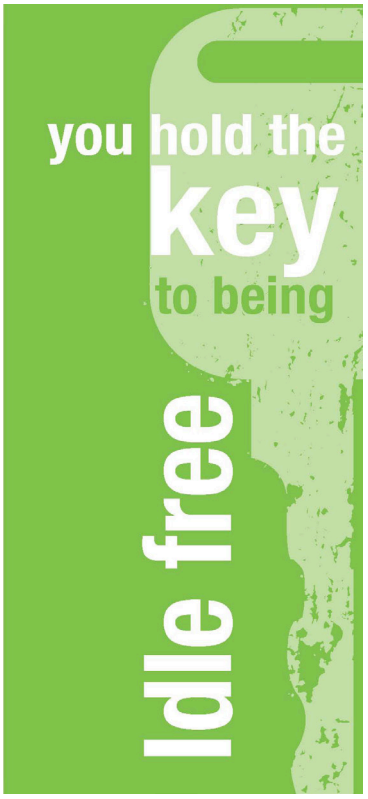
School Buses Offer Unique Opportunities

As parents are often concerned about poor air quality around their children's school, many anti-idling campaigns have targeted diesel-powered school buses. School districts nationwide have responded to these campaigns by passing regulations and training drivers on idle-reduction techniques. There are numerous sources of information on designing a campaign that works for your school, many of which teachers can use as environmental education teaching tools. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Clean School Bus USA program has many links that can help parents and school districts reduce idling (*www.epa.gov/cleanschoolbus*). In addition to improving air quality, reducing unnecessary idling can save school districts money through reduced fuel cost and engine wear.

Each Citizen Can Contribute

Once you have a better idea of why people idle, it's easy to question when idling is really necessary. There are a number of ways that citizens can reduce their own idling and encourage smart, responsible behavior in their communities.

- Contact your local Clean Cities coalition. Local partnerships, with support from the U.S. Department of Energy, have run anti-idling campaigns. Find the coalition nearest you at *www.cleancities.energy.gov*.
- Talk to the principal of your child's school to ask that anti-idling signs be posted where school buses and parents' vehicles wait.
- Work with your school board on a district-wide anti-idling campaign.
- Talk to the manager of your bank, drive-through restaurant, or pharmacy about ways to reduce wait times in line as a way to reduce idling. Suggest that signs be posted to remind patrons not to idle.



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