



Highlights: Tire Stores

Selecting the right tire dealer could spare significant wear-and-tear on your wallet, to the tune of hundreds of dollars. What's more, having the right tires for your vehicle, maintaining them properly, and replacing them when they go bad will make driving safer (and likely more pleasant), and cut your fuel costs. **Washington Consumers' Checkbook** (available at www.checkbook.org) priced specific tires at tire dealers in the Washington area and online. Some highlights from Checkbook's report:

- Checkbook found major price differences among local tire stores and online retailers. For example, prices for a set of four Michelin Latitude Tour tires for a Ford Explorer ranged from \$784 at BJ's to \$1,519 at the Goodyear Auto Service Center in McLean—a difference of \$735.
- Among local stores, big chains BJ's, Walmart, Costco, and Mr. Tire generally offered low prices, but Checkbook also found some low prices at independent tire dealers, repair shops, and even new-car dealerships.
- Not all of the big chains or big-box stores offered low prices. Surveyed stores for Just Tires, Merchant's Tire & Auto, NTB, Pep Boys, Sam's Club, and Sears quoted prices that overall ranged from slightly below average to higher than average.
- Although BJ's and Costco offered low prices, a big advantage to using a conventional tire shop is that selection at warehouse clubs is fairly limited.
- Online sellers Amazon and OnlineTires.com also offered consistently low prices—with incomparable selection. These retailers will ship tires to your home or to a local shop for installation. Checkbook added an average installation fee of \$90 to the online sellers' prices.
- Among the online sellers Amazon's prices were the lowest—about three percent lower than prices offered by OnlineTires.com and five percent lower than TireRack.com's. Prices at TireBuyer.com were just five percent better than average when Checkbook factored in installation costs.
- Stores that had low prices for one tire model tended to be competitive for others, but you can't count on that. Some stores quoted low prices for one tire model but average or higher-than-average prices for others.
- When shopping for price, specify exactly what you want. If you want mounting, balancing, and valve stems to be included, make that clear. And because there are so many tire models, many with very similar names and specifications, cite the tire model precisely, preferably by the parts number.
- Stores tend to specialize in certain brands, order some upon request, and refuse to handle others. They are likely to offer their best prices for their specialties. Indeed, some of the stores would probably have looked better if Checkbook had shopped for other brands.
- While shopping for tires, you may be offered road-hazard coverage. Some stores, including BJ's, Costco and Sam's Club, provide this type of coverage for free, but many charge an extra \$40 to \$75 to cover a set of four tires.
 - The protection covers tire damage due to road hazards during normal driving. In other words, if you get a flat from a nail or other road debris, the company promises to repair or, if necessary, replace the tire. But if you get a flat from running over a curb or because of other driver errors, you get nothing. And plans never pay for failure from worn tread.
 - Unless they're free, these plans aren't good deals. First, consider that if a nail flattens your tire, a shop will charge only \$20 or so to plug and repair it. Just as you can't predict when or where you'll have a flat, you can't predict which tire will get one, so you'll have to buy the

plan for all four. So you're paying \$60 or so to protect yourself against having to pay \$20 or so for each tire repair you may never need. Second, flat tires due to nails and other debris are relatively unlikely.

- As with any type of "protection plan" pushed by big-ticket sellers, what you're really being offered is insurance that is highly profitable for the seller but provides little benefit to the buyer.
- If the roadside assistance element of one of these plans is of value to you, consider joining AAA, which offers various membership benefits in addition to roadside help.

Whichever tires you buy, a key to getting the most possible value from them is to maintain them properly. Here are some guidelines:

- Be sure to have your tires balanced when you buy them (most dealers will balance for free). Then have them re-balanced if you experience vibration or uneven tread wear.
- Keep tires properly inflated.
- Rotation generally isn't worth paying for. Regular tire rotation will extend the tread life of a set of four by allowing even wear. But the gain in tread life will probably not offset the cost of having the tires rotated, unless your shop rotates them for free.
- Misalignment of wheels can result from a bad jolt such as hitting a pothole. It can cause your steering system to pull to one side or the other and can cause uneven tire wear. If you observe such problems, be sure to have the alignment checked.
- You need to replace your tires when they wear down to 1/16-inch of tread. You will know your tires have reached this level when the tire tread is even with the wear bars that are built into the tread. You can also measure the tread with a penny: insert the penny Lincoln-head first in a tread groove; if the treads don't cover part of the head, they are worn too far down.
- Even if you don't drive much, your tires will still suffer the drying effects of aging, reducing their performance and safety, possibly even before the tread is worn down. A number of auto manufacturers recommend that tires be replaced after six years, regardless of tread wear.
- Regardless of tread wear or age, you will want to replace a tire if you see a bulge or blister on the sidewall, and you will want an expert inspection of the tires if you see cuts or cracking.

Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.

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