

# Countdown for Vehicle Safety

Astronauts do it! Aircraft pilots do it! Truck drivers who value their lives do it!

Call it a countdown or checkoff or safety checklist or whatever—the principle is basic to all of them. It is the principle of checking out various working parts of complex mechanical devices, such as automobiles and trucks, before the operator trusts his or her life to the machine.

A good time to make a safety check on trucks or cars is while the engine is warming up. Any order of checking will do, just so it makes sense to the operator. Just as important, the check must be done regularly, without fail, and it must be thorough. Here is a suggested basic countdown:

- Circle the vehicle and check each wheel for wear, damage, or misalignment. Check tire pressure and tread thickness; uneven wear of tread can mean misalignment. Flat or soft tires can cause kneading and flexing of sidewalls and treads, which builds up heat that weakens tires.
- Check for tires that look underinflated or flat because of overloading. This can cause heat buildup in a tire, shorten its life, and even cause tire failure or blowout.
- Step up on the front bumper and bounce up and down to test front-end shock absorbers. Shocks are weak if the vehicle's bouncing does not stop when you stop. Malfunctioning shocks cause sluggish or erratic braking.
- Check to see that all devices are working properly—such as lights for driving, turning, backing up, and braking. Also check windshield wipers and signal horns.
- Put the vehicle in gear and go forward or backward a few feet, testing the brakes. Safe braking takes hold without noticeable delay and without the sound of metal on metal.
- Check all glass and mirrors for clear visibility. Especially look for dirt, grime, cracks, or breaks.
- Check any cargo for proper stacking and tie-down. Lashing needs to be strong enough and secured in such a way as to hold the load and keep it from shifting.

This is a partial checklist. Different drivers include other checks, depending upon the kind of vehicle, weight, and bulk of loads to be hauled, as well as on driving conditions and weather. The important thing is to practice the countdown before every trip. It acts as a double check on vehicle maintenance and gives the operator a clear idea of future needs for maintenance and repair.

The countdown is no substitute for maintaining a vehicle in top shape—this includes its mechanical parts. But checking before the trip can give the operator an edge on making it a safe one.