

Time to inspect those wheels and tires. Here's how.

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Photograph by David S. Wallens

Start the inspection process with the date code. You'll find it stamped into the sidewall, and it starts with DOT and ends with a four-digit number. The first two numbers denote the week the tire was built, with the second two marking the year. So a tire wearing a

DOT code ending with 1620 was built during the sixteenth week of 2020.



How old is too old? Advice from Tire Rack:

“Approximately 6 years of service and 10 years from the manufacturing date are the rough limits of tire usage.”

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After those dates, you're giving up safety, handling and comfort. Our own back-to-back testing has shown expired tires to deliver unpredictable lane changes and diminished threshold braking, with 60-to-0 panic stops requiring some 30 additional feet.

Tires not quite that old? Still, take a few minutes to inspect them for cracks and checking, bumps and bruises. Any excessive curb damage?

Now let's look at the tread. Any visible cords are an immediate fail—do not pass go. A tread depth of less than 4/32 inch usually signals that the time is nigh. Feathered or damaged tread? Also not good.

A quick inspection can reveal much. The tires in the photo above, dated the 16th week of 2020, could theoretically remain in service through April 2026. Immediate fails, though: the corded tread, cracked spoke and egged-out lug seat.

Like tires, wheels are not eternal. Let's start by looking for obvious damage: Excessive curb rash could point toward a bent rim, while a chipped finish might correlate with a crack.

Run your fingers up and down each spoke. (Yes, you'll get dirty.) Does everything feel straight, crack-free and kosher? To be completely thorough, let's pull each wheel from the car and inspect the lug seats: If they look deformed or egged out, it's time to go shopping. You could also throw each wheel on a balancer and look for runout—more than 1.2 mm is likely too much.

Finally, are you losing air, but you know the tires and valves are good? Porous wheels could be your issue.