

Am I Harming the Environment by Driving?

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Driving is almost undoubtedly the most polluting activity that most people in the United States engage in daily, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (see Reference 5). Emissions from driving contribute significantly to global warming, as well as local-scale pollution. In cities, emissions from driving often create smog, a condition in which pollution is trapped in an urban area. The poor air quality that results contributes to significant health problems (see Reference 2).

Emissions

The exhaust from a car releases hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxide, which contribute to ground-level ozone. [Car exhaust](#) also releases carbon monoxide, which contributes significantly to global warming. Emissions are particularly high during the hottest times of the day and while idling (see Reference 5).

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Other Harmful Effects

Fuel production creates a significant amount of emissions, which drivers support by filling their tanks with gasoline. When considering the total average emissions produced throughout the life cycle of a car, fuel production accounts for 19 percent, according to the World Resources Institute. In addition, manufacturing a car and extracting the raw materials to create it produce emissions (see Reference 3).

Driving Habits

If you must drive, car pool with others whenever possible. Ride with co-workers, or find people who need to car pool to a nearby location through websites such as eRideshare.com or a municipality's van pool. In addition, clean out your car regularly so that you're not carrying a heavier load than necessary, which causes your car to burn more fuel. Using common sense to plan your errands well, and refraining from idling, lets you use your car more efficiently, the EPA says. Open your windows instead of using the air conditioner too (see Reference 1).

Vehicle Choices and Maintenance

If you're looking for a new car, look for a vehicle with a strong SmartWay certification score on the EPA's Green Vehicle Guide website. The guide gives vehicles scores of 1 to 10, with 10 being the best, and shows their fuel economy in the form of miles per gallon (see Resource 1). To make your existing car more environmentally friendly, have it inspected regularly to check its emissions and make sure it's functioning at its best.

Alternatives to Driving

Living in an urban area often makes it easier to avoid driving. Taking the train or bus is a more environmentally friendly alternative to driving a car. Riding a bike or walking is an even better option, requiring no emissions for your daily commute. These options all reduce traffic congestion, allowing drivers to reach their destination sooner rather than lingering in traffic, and decrease the need for more parking.

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