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Winter tires: facts & friction

Brian Turner

The Ottawa Citizen

Friday, December 03, 2004

If you've been shopping for tires lately, you may have be presented with some questionable "facts." As in:

1. Snow tire use is mandatory by provincial law in Quebec.
 2. Snow tire use will soon be legislated in Ontario.
 - 3: It is illegal to operate a vehicle with only two snow tires.
 - 4: If only two snow tires are being purchased for a front-wheel-drive vehicle, the tires should go on the back.
- Numbers one through three are myths -- bald-tired lies? -- but even I got caught on No. 4. It's true.

According to John Carey, service manager at Jim Keay Ford Lincoln, and Don Frisby, president of Frisby Tires, manufacturers including Goodyear and Michelin recommend placing winter tires on the back, not the front, if only two are

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CREDIT: Nick Brancaccio

Winter tires aren't required by law, but they are a smart idea, say provincial police. Install them front and rear.

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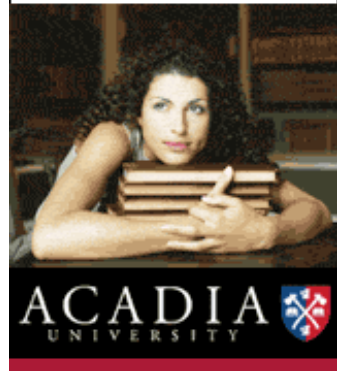
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being installed. This provides braking control and lessens the risk of spinning out in a panic stop.

My old advice to customers at the service and parts counters was that if a good set of "all-season" radials wasn't up to the road conditions, then maybe it wasn't a good day to be driving. That tired line, I see now, wasn't doing my clients any service.

Sr. Const. Eric Booth of the Ottawa detachment of the Ontario Provincial Police knows from his years patrolling highways that if more people used winter tires, front and back, his team would respond to fewer collisions and ditch dives. He and Mr. Frisby agree that if you're going to put snow rubbers on the daily driver, then put them on all four wheels.

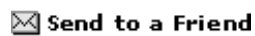
While traction for acceleration is needed, control during braking and steering manoeuvres is more important to get you to your destination in one piece. By the way, Const. Booth's cruiser is equipped with four winter-tread tires.

And for owners of sport-utilities and all-wheel-drive cars, Const. Booth's experience is that four-wheel-drive (which is manually selectable) and AWD (which engages automatically) will get you into trouble twice as fast and twice as far as two-wheel-drive. More than once, he's observed the surprise of SUV drivers when they realize their supposedly "go anywhere through anything" vehicles have no more stopping power than the two-wheel-drive economy car they just rear-ended (maybe less due to the SUV's larger rolling mass).

Combining snows and all-season radials is even more of a no-no on these vehicles. Even with matching tire sizes, most snow or winter-tread tires -- identifiable by the "snowflake and mountain" symbol embossed on their sidewalls -- have a slightly larger diameter than their all-season counterparts. This is due to their larger, more aggressive tread design. Because the slightly larger tire rotates at a different rate than its smaller cousin to travel the same distance, this small size differential can play havoc on all- and four-wheel-drive systems, even preventing the transfer case on some from engaging.

Mr. Frisby sees more and more snow tire sales these days, and thinks customers are finally recognizing that all-season tires can't serve the Florida and Ontario winters equally well. But where did the "all-season" concept come from?

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Winter tires: facts & friction

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Mr. Frisby figures it was forced upon tire companies by carmakers in a campaign to reduce the cost of vehicle ownership. He notes that all-season tires made their first large appearance on the North American scene at about the same time as front-wheel-drive cars debuted. And of course front-wheel-drive delivered better traction, so why bother with winter tires?



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Now, he says, Ottawa has become Canada's third-largest per capita snow tire market, behind only Quebec City and Montreal.

Mr. Frisby agreed that a trend toward lower-profile tires on popular, less expensive cars is one cause of increased snow tire sales.

With factory-accessorized entry-level vehicles such as the Mazda3, Toyota Corolla and now defunct Chevrolet Cavalier/Pontiac Sunfire sporting low-sidewall, wide-tread tires, many customers found out what little control this type of tire offers on snow- and slush-covered roads.

With the increase of alloy rims on today's cars, steel winter rims are making a comeback. John Carey at Jim Keay Ford Lincoln has seen enough of an increase to cause him to plan for on-site storage of customers' tires and rims so they can have the safety of winter tires without the pain of lugging them back and forth for seasonal installation.

For the many who do store tires at home, Canadian Tire offers heavy-duty, handle-equipped Seasonal Tire Tote storage bags to help you avoid getting tire and brake residue on your clothing or vehicle interior. The bags are \$19.99 a pair.

Mr. Carey challenged me to note the number of cars on the roads these days with plain black steel rims for winter use. Not only do they protect the alloy rims from the ravages of salt pitting, but they give the customer the

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flexibility to install the winter tires at a moment's notice in case of a sudden storm, or to reinstall the all-seasons for a trip south or during an extended bout of clear roads in a mild winter.

So what's a safety-minded car owner to do? The experts suggest the following:

- 1) Put snow or winter season tires on all four wheels.
- 2) Install them on steel or winter-use rims. This allows the installation of the snow tires at a moment's notice, (even as a do-it-yourself project) and reduces tread wear.
- 3) Slow down when roads are snowy and give yourself more time to make your trip and more distance in which to stop safely.
- 4) If your vehicle has an antilock brake system, make some practice stops in an empty, snow-covered parking lot. Know that you don't have to pump the brake pedal with ABS, and you can steer while braking.

Finally, I checked out the cost of equipping two popular vehicles with winter tires and rims. For a Honda Civic sedan with P185/70R14 tires, a Michelin X-Ice tire from Ottawa Honda will set you back \$110, and a rim is \$65. Total cost: \$700.

For a late model Dodge Caravan, a P215/70R15 BF Goodrich runs \$125 and a rim is \$60 at Dilawri's Chrysler Jeep. Total cost: \$740 (or \$615, parts staff advised me, if you take advantage of a DaimlerChrysler "Buy 3 get 1 free" tire sale until Dec. 31).

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