Headline: Don’t be too quick   
 to change air filter

Maintaining our vehicles is the best way to keep them running smoothly. It’s wise, however, to make sure a part *needs* to be replaced before replacing it.

That often is a conundrum with air filters. Service technicians and the EPA for years encouraged motorists to change the engine’s air filter to ensure maximum fuel economy.

It worked well for carbureted vehicles, but a U.S. Department of Energy study found that air-filter condition has no significant impact on the fuel economy of modern, fuel-injected engines. A badly restricted air filter, however, will reduce the engine’s maximum power output.

So, when should air filters be replaced? Visible dirt on the filter’s surface is not a good indicator. Air filters do a better job of trapping contaminants once they have been in operation long enough to gain a light coating of dust and dirt.

To test an air filter, remove it from its housing and hold it in front of a bright light. It can be returned to service if the light passes easily through more half the filter.

The light test works well with pleated paper filters. Some cars, however, have extended-life engine air filters with dense fabric filtering agents that are highly effective, but don’t allow light to pass through them. Unless a filter of this type is visibly caked with dirt, replace it at the mileage intervals specified by the vehicle manufacturer.

Some vehicles, primarily pickup trucks, have an engine air filter-service indicator on the filter housing. This indicator measures the air pressure drop across the filter when the engine is running. The pressure drop increases as the filter becomes more restricted.

It’s recommended to check the indicator at each oil change and replace the filter when the indicator reads to do so.

Drivers can change an air filter on their own or have it done by a professional technician. AAA has more than 7,000 Approved Auto Repair shops from which to choose.

Members can find a nearby shop by visiting AAA.com/AutoRepair to find a nearby AAA Approved Auto Repair facility.