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Why You Shouldn't Brake Into A Pothole Unlikely Advice To Avoid Your Car's Worst Enemy

by: Josh Max, AOL Autos

Next to an actual fender bender, the sound of your ride making a direct hit on a pothole is one of the most spine-jolting noises you'll ever hear in your car.

But if you think your nervous system is rattled by running your 3,000-pound ride into an enormous road abyss, think about your car's tires, chassis, suspension and rims, all of which can be compromised after a particularly vicious encounter with a pothole. We've recently talked to a few experts about winter's worst car threat and got some pretty interesting -- if unlikely -- advice.

"Potholes are a big issue, especially at the end of winter when the ground expands and new craters appear," said Matt Edmonds, VP of The Tire Rack.

He told us that drivers shouldn't assume they're in the clear if immediate symptoms don't appear.

"A lot of times, a driver will hit a pothole straight on and assume since they didn't get a flat that there's been no damage to the tire, rim or suspension," Edmonds said.

He recommends getting the car aligned or at least inspected during the next oil change following a severe pothole hit.

"If something has been damaged in the suspension after smacking a pothole, you need to find that out rather than waiting for a breakdown when you'll pay towing fees in addition to having to fix the problem," Edmonds said.

Rich White, Executive director of the Car Care Council, says drivers should heed warning signs if they've recently hit a crater.

"If your car pulls in one direction instead of maintaining a straight path after you strike a pothole, that indicates an alignment problem," he says. "You have the get that checked out because your alignment ensures safe handling of the car as well as keeping your tires in good condition over time. Also, if you feel a loss of control, if you feel the car bottoming out or bouncing excessively on rough roads, those are indicators that the steering and suspension may have been damaged---and that's something you need to pay attention to, because both are key safety-related systems that determine your car's ride and handling."

Of course, it's best not to hit a pothole in the first place. Here's the advice White provided to help you avoid them, or minimize damage if you strike one.

Don't tailgate: *"If the driver in front of you hits a pothole, you'll have a better chance to take evasive action if you're not riding their rear bumper," said White.*

Slow down: *Don't believe in the old wives tale that you could, in theory, "fly" over the pothole if you're going really fast. That might work in a movie but not in the real world. Most potholes are big enough to do damage even if you're traveling at highway speeds. "When you hit a pothole at faster speeds, the damage can be far worse," said White.*

Puddles Contain Hidden Dangers: *Use extreme caution when driving over puddles. "They can conceal massive potholes," said White. This one rings especially true for me. Two years ago, one water-concealed pothole on a ramp took out both front and rear tires on the right side of my car. The only benefit of the winter weather in this case is that sometimes a puddle can freeze to fill in a pothole temporarily. But don't count on it.*

Hold the steering wheel tightly: *Make sure you're holding the wheel so you don't lose control. A tight, two-handed grip is recommended. "Hitting a pothole when you've got a loose grip on the wheel can snap the wheel left or right, and you into another car, or off the road," White says.*

If you're going to hit a pothole, don't brake into it: *This is probably the most unorthodox piece of advice we've received about potholes so far, but it stands to reason. "It can actually increase damage," said White. "Get off the brakes the moment before you hit and let the car absorb the blow." When you brake heavily, your car tends to nose dive. When you let off the brake, the car rocks back and you have more suspension travel over the front wheels. This is a good thing when you're going to do some crater exploring on your favorite road.*

Alignments, Potholes Or Not: *Tire Rack's Edmonds says it's a good idea to get your car aligned after a severe winter regardless of whether or not you've struck a pothole.*

"This winter has been brutal for drivers in the Northeast and Midwest " said Edmonds. "And your car may look fine at spring thaw. But when you drive faster in summer, that's when you've really got to make sure your car is up to the task and has no post-winter alignment or tire issues."

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