

Turn off that car and stop polluting

By Melissa Stevens • February 21, 2010

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In light of the attention drawn to the issue of idling after the recent Metro Council vote to amend an anti-idling law designed specifically to prevent automobile theft, the Clean Air Partnership of Middle Tennessee would like to offer some additional reasons why it's important not to idle your vehicle unnecessarily.

Automobiles are a major source of air pollution in the U.S. and here in Middle Tennessee. Sixty percent of Tennesseans live in counties where ozone levels exceed Environmental Protection Agency standards. Vehicle emissions contribute to health issues such as asthma and other respiratory illness, and to environmental problems, including unhealthy levels of ground-level ozone and particle pollution.

Individual driving habits make a big difference in the amount of pollution a car produces. The average American idles for about 16 minutes a day, resulting in 94 million tons of CO₂ emissions and 10 billion gallons of gasoline every year.

Half of that can be attributed to unnecessary idling, which occurs when warming up your vehicle or waiting in line at a drive-through or to pick up a passenger. Some studies suggest that many people unnecessarily idle, at least in part, because they are unaware or misinformed about the benefits to themselves and the environment.

Let's take a minute to debunk two common myths about idling:

- You need to warm up your engine before driving to reduce wear and tear. While this may have been true with older vehicles, most modern fuel-injected engines do not need to be warmed up; they are most efficient when being driven, not when sitting idle. In fact, idling for long periods in cold weather can actually cause excessive engine wear.
- It takes more fuel to restart your engine than to leave it running. Restarting a vehicle actually uses less fuel and causes less wear and tear on the engine than idling for 10 seconds or longer. In fact, the EPA recommends idling for no more than 30 seconds when not in traffic. Reducing idling time is easily accomplished with some simple changes like parking your car instead of using drive-through lanes and shutting your engine off while waiting to pick up passengers, especially in school pick up lines. Idling in these lines exposes children to a dangerous cloud of vehicle emissions every time they enter or exit their schools.

For more information about reducing unnecessary idling and other ways to improve our air quality, please visit www.CleanAirPartnership.info.