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Flat Tire... Alone... No Need for Panic

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Flat tire...alone...
no need for panic

By Sally Young
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GLTTT - BANG - PLOP, PLOP, PLOP, and now there's you, your car, and a flat tire. Can you fix it yourself?

There's no help handy, and you must change the tire. If you're prepared you have a jack, wrench, screwdriver, gloves, flashlight, and above all, a fully inflated spare tire.

Iowa traffic laws state that a driver should never leave a parked car during dusk or darkness without lights, so turn on the headlights, then switch off the ignition since a car must not be running when you begin the repair.

Be sure the emergency brake is set. With all the preliminaries under control you can begin the actual tire change.

Place the jack under the rear bumper about eight inches from the wheel, where the bracing joins the rear bumper. Make sure the jack is perpendicular to the ground. There's danger the support will fall away when the car is raised if the jack is not correctly placed.

Raise the car so the tire is completely off the ground and can be removed easily.

Using the screwdriver, pry off the hub cap and place it nearby on the ground. Remove the lugs, or nut and bolt attachments holding the wheel on the axle with a wrench. Place the lugs in the hub cap so you can find them immediately when you need them.

Pull the deflated tire off and hoist the spare into its place. Now, while holding the tire on with one hand, screw on the lugs and tighten them with the wrench. Refit the hub cap, jack down the car, put the flat tire and all the tools in the trunk and you're ready to be on your way.

Most flat tires can be prevented. In fact about 90 per cent of all tire failures are the fault of the owner or driver. Any tire, even new ones, can be ruined by:

Improper tire inflation.
Incorrect wheel alignment.
Infrequent rotation of tires.
Poor use of brakes.
Puncturing and wearing by road obstacles.

Over-inflation will concentrate wear on the center of the tires, and under-inflation damages the tire sides. Incorrect wheel alignment wears the tires unevenly.

Hard use of brakes and fast starting will cut away the tire treads. Worn tires are particularly susceptible to bits of sharp material. To prevent much severe and uneven wear have the tires rotated from one wheel position to another every 5,000 miles.

Check air pressure in your tires regularly against known standard pressure for your tires to tell if one tire has a slow leak.

Manufacturers have tried to make tire changing easier and less hazardous. The jack, wrench, flashlight and spare tire make you a well prepared driver. As an added safety device, one manufacturer produces a caution sign, 9 x 24 x 24 inches, that can be collapsed into a compact bundle and carried in your car. The sign made of aluminum, has reflecting letters that are clearly visible to 250 feet at night.

The flashlight and the warning flare have been effectively combined in a small light that plugs into a car cigarette lighter. One end is red to warn oncoming traffic and the other end is a powerful flashlight.

If you can't afford the latest in flares, a waxed milk carton, set burning beside your car at night will be as effective and will burn from four to five minutes. A stone placed in the bottom will keep it from tipping.

Fixing a flat isn't all it's jacked up to be, but panic and impatience will only cost time and safety. A practice run, while you're home in the driveway can eliminate a lot of confusion that could come later when you're at the side of a lonely road with a real flat.