

## A roadmap to emergency roadside assistance

You're stranded by the side of the road with an empty gas tank, a flat tire or smoke pouring out of your hood. This is not the time to wonder why you didn't buy roadside assistance with your auto insurance policy.

Instead, experts say, you should study the roadside assistance coverage that your auto insurer offers, consider alternatives and, finally, purchase the plan that works best for you.

"You have to understand what you're buying and make an informed choice," says Sonja Larkin-Thorne, a consumer representative for the National Association of Insurance Commissioners.

Stranded! Your auto insurer to the rescue?

Most auto insurance companies offer roadside assistance as an optional add-on to a policy, and it's usually fairly cheap – often less than \$10 a year. For example, Brian Rauber, a Farmer Insurance agent in Missouri, says his company's roadside assistance costs about \$1 a month. So, it can be tempting to just sign up without asking for details – but experts say that's a mistake. Here are some questions you should ask your insurance agent or company:

1. How will the service work when I need it?

Some insurance companies – such as Farmers, Nationwide and Progressive – offer sign-and-drive coverage, where the policyholder can sign up for the service and the insurance company pays the bill. But some other insurers require the policyholder to pay upfront, and then get reimbursed up to a certain amount later. "If you have to pay the money then get reimbursed – well, I hope you have a hundred bucks on you when you need your tire changed," Larkin-Thorne says. It's also a good idea to ask how long a customer usually must wait for a tow truck or other help to arrive, says Philip Reed, senior consumer advice editor at automotive website Edmunds.com.

2. What exactly is included?

Many roadside plans restrict the number of miles your car can be towed or put a time limit – for example, one hour – on roadside repair. If you have an old car that might break down, check to see to how many miles of towing are included with the plan, and what the additional charge is to tow a car farther, says Reed, noting that he knows of consumers who've paid \$200 or more out of pocket for towing. "Towing per mile can be extraordinarily expensive," he says.

### 3. Who operates the service for you?

Most insurers contract with a separate company to actually handle roadside calls from their policyholders, according to Larkin-Thorne. So, she says, consumers should look at the size, reputation and network of the company that actually will be performing the service. “If you’re driving between, say, New Mexico and California in that hot stretch of desert, is that company going to have a network to service you?” she asks.

### 4. Does the service follow the policyholder or the vehicle?

If you have coverage through your auto insurance policy but you get stuck in a ditch while driving a rental car, are you covered? With Liberty Mutual, a policyholder who has towing and labor coverage can get service while driving a rental or borrowed car, spokesman Glenn Greenberg says. But if the car is borrowed, the policyholder would have to pay for the service call upfront, and then get reimbursed. Also, some consumers worry that too many calls for assistance could drive up their auto insurance premiums, consumer advocates say. For example, if you run out of gas three times in a year, will the company weigh that when deciding how risky you are as a driver? Amy Bach, executive director of consumer advocacy group United Policyholders, says that in theory they shouldn’t, “but you never know.”

#### Alternative routes to roadside help

If you decide you really don’t want to risk going through your insurance company for roadside assistance, or if you don’t like the way their coverage works, plenty of other options are available. Here are some of the most common ones:

- **Automobile club** – Getting roadside assistance through an auto club, such as AAA or the Better World Club, is typically the most expensive option; joining can AAA cost about \$65 to \$125, depending on which level of membership you choose. But consumer advocates say joining an auto club offers many advantages. For one, you know you’re dealing with an established company. AAA has tow truck relationships everywhere in the country, Bach says. And you get other perks. “The added benefits to auto clubs are huge,” Reed says. For instance, he says, you can score hotel discounts nationwide.
- **Other organizations** – Many clubs and organizations offer roadside assistance for members. For example, AARP offers several plan options, through Roadside Assistance from Allstate, that include extras such as a \$5,000 in reward money to catch a thief who steals your car, and reimbursement of up to \$1,000 to hire an attorney to fight a traffic ticket.
- **Credit card company** – If you assume your credit card has you covered, check the fine print, experts say. Most credit card companies simply offer their cardholders roadside assistance at a price they’ve negotiated with the service provider, and the fee gets charged to your card. “You would pay less than the

going rate to be towed – you would pay a flat fee,” each time you use the service, says Linda Sherry, director of national priorities for Consumer Action. For example, Visa offers the Roadside Dispatch program, which costs \$59.95 for each service call – a few dollars less than a yearlong basic AAA membership, but pricier than the \$10 or so a year charged by many auto insurers. However, it’s free if you never use the service.

- Cellphone company – Many cellphone carriers offer roadside assistance for a few dollars a month added to your bill, but experts say this might not be the best option. For one, if you forget your phone at home, you could be stuck, Reed says. Verizon’s fine print states that you must have the “enrolled phone” with you to get service. Each line must be enrolled to get roadside service on that phone, and it costs \$3 per month per line.
- Car manufacturer – And, finally, before you sign up for any plan, check to see whether you’re already covered by the manufacturer of your car. Many new cars come with roadside assistance, which often is in effect during the bumper-to-bumper warranty, or about three years, Reed says. “It often gets lost in the excitement of buying a new car,” he says, “and you don’t even know you have it.”
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