

You can start making a difference today

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Driving and air quality — we know they're connected. What comes out of our tailpipes goes into the air we breathe — 3,400 gallons every day for the average person.

What are we supposed to do, really? Even when we see the brown cloud over downtown, we can't stop in the middle of the interstate and jump into the car next to us because the message board says, "Air Alert Today — Consider Carpooling."

The answer to "What can I do?" is different for everyone. We all live and work in different places, have different schedules, obligations, and budgets. The goal of the Clean Air Partnership of Middle Tennessee is to provide a one-stop shop for answers, because there are as many answers as there are individuals.

We need to remember even small changes can have a big impact on air quality. For example, TODAY you can:

- Skip the drive-through and go inside. EPA estimates that, for every minute a typical auto engine sits idling, it emits 6.6 grams of pollutants (volatile organic compounds, nitrous oxides and carbon dioxide). If 2 million drivers stopped idling unnecessarily for two minutes just once a week, these emissions would be reduced by over 1,500 TONS a year.
- Drive smoothly. Avoid sudden starts and stops — you'll get better gas mileage (and so will everyone behind you).
- Avoid driving during rush hour — including lunchtime. Save time, gas and the air by planning to run errands later in the evening, and trip-chain.

Now consider some things that take a little planning, but have a greater impact. NEXT WEEK you could:

- Try a one-day carpool. RTA has a matching service that helps people find carpools. Ask around; maybe your employer can help.
- Try riding the bus or train. MTA buses now allow you to board with just the swipe of a credit card, and their online trip planner helps you plan your route, including how far you'll have to walk. Train passes can be purchased at many Kroger stores or at the station.
- Try riding your bike. Maps of bike routes and greenways are available online, and MTA buses have bike racks.

Long-term conservation

With some long-term planning, you can really impact air quality and your budget. Some things to consider for NEXT YEAR include:

- Buy a fuel-efficient vehicle. Consider gas mileage when purchasing a new car. How many of us really need an "off-road" vehicle?
- Consider the cost of a commute when buying a home. Calculate the value of the hours you spend in traffic each month. Add to that the cost of fuel and wear and tear on your car (use an online commute-cost calculator). Add those costs to your monthly mortgage payment when you are considering where to buy a home.

Change isn't easy, and we all have unique barriers keeping us from trying something new. But things are changing around Middle Tennessee, and there are more options than ever. Everyone can find at least one thing they can change to help our air.

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