

AJSS AUTO CONSULTING LLC



# 10 Things to Check Before Buying a Used Car

The fast-reference guide for buyers who need clear,  
actionable checks — no mechanical knowledge required

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FROM THE DESK OF AJSS AUTO CONSULTING

## The 10 Checks That Save Buyers the Most Money

In 15 years of automotive consulting, I've walked through thousands of used car transactions. The same costly surprises show up over and over — and almost all of them could have been caught in the first 20 minutes of inspection if the buyer knew where to look.

This guide gives you the 10 highest-value checks, ranked by how much money they save buyers. You don't need to know how cars work — you just need to know what to look for and what to ask.

TIME NEEDED

**20 min**

TOOLS NEEDED

**None**

AVG. SAVINGS

**\$500+**



**Important:** These 10 checks do NOT replace a professional pre-purchase inspection. Think of them as the filter — pass these and then spend \$100–\$150 on a mechanic inspection before you sign.

# Checks 1–5: Do These First

1

## Run the VIN Report Before You Go

A Carfax or AutoCheck report reveals accident history, flood/salvage title, # of owners, and open recalls. A clean report doesn't mean a perfect car — but a dirty one is a dealbreaker before you waste a trip.

● Never Skip

2

## Check for Frame or Structural Damage

Open and close every door, hood, and trunk. They should swing smoothly and close flush. Uneven panel gaps, rippled metal, or misaligned hinges signal frame damage — the most expensive repair on any vehicle.

● Major Money Risk

3

## Check for Rust in the Right Places

Surface rust on a rocker panel is cosmetic. Rust on the frame rails, subframe, or floor pans is structural. Get underneath or ask the seller to put it on a lift — rust in the wrong place makes the car unsafe and nearly worthless.

● Safety Issue

4

## Check All Fluid Levels and Color

Pull the oil dipstick — black sludge means neglected maintenance. Check coolant color (should be green, orange, or pink — never brown). Milky or foamy oil or coolant is a head gasket warning sign. Brown brake fluid means it hasn't been changed in years.

● Maintenance Signal

5

## Test Every Electronic Feature

Windows, locks, mirrors, AC, heat, all dashboard buttons, backup camera, and every light (headlights, brake lights, turn signals). Electronics are expensive to repair and sellers routinely "forget" to mention broken ones.

● Easy to Miss

## Checks 6–10: Finish Strong

6

### Inspect Tires — All Four Plus the Spare

Look for even tread wear across the tire. Uneven wear (worn edges or worn center) signals alignment or inflation problems. Mismatched brands on the same axle suggests corner damage or deferred maintenance. New tires on an old car can hide problems.

● Negotiating Leverage

7

### Look Under the Car

Get low and check underneath for oil drips on the ground, welded patches on the frame, or fresh undercoating sprayed over rust. Dealers sometimes apply thick undercoating to hide rust just before a sale — fresh black spray on an older vehicle is a red flag.

● Common Trick

8

### Test Drive at Highway Speed

Get it above 55 mph if possible. Listen for vibrations, pulls to one side, or shimmy in the steering wheel — these point to wheel balance, alignment, or suspension issues. Braking from 60 mph should feel straight and firm, not soft or veering.

● Must Do

9

### Check Service and Maintenance Records

Ask for receipts, dealer records, or a Carfax service history. A car with no records isn't automatically bad — but a seller who claims "it was always maintained" with zero paperwork to show deserves skepticism. Oil changes every 5,000–7,500 miles is the baseline.

● Ask Every Time

10

### Run the Numbers Before You Negotiate

Check KBB, Edmunds, and NADA for the vehicle's fair market range. Factor in needed repairs, tire replacement, and deferred maintenance as negotiating leverage. Never negotiate from the sticker price — negotiate from the fair market value minus your repair estimate.

● Negotiating Power



## Found a Car You Like? Let's Review It Together.

Book a live consulting session before you sign anything. We'll review the listing, the VIN report, and the numbers — so you know exactly what you're buying and what it's worth.

**\$50**

### 30-Minute Quick Review

VIN report review · Red flag check · Top 3 concerns · Go / No-Go recommendation

**MOST POPULAR**

**\$125**

### 1-Hour Full Deep Dive

Full inspection review · Negotiation strategy · Fair price range · Dealer red flags · Next steps

✓ Vendor-neutral advice · ✓ No upsells · ✓ No dealership affiliations

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