

Don't Get Hot Under the Hood



by Debbie Feldman

It's 90 degrees and you're stuck in a rush-hour traffic jam. You notice steam coming from under the hood of your car. You look at the temperature gauge and it's in the red zone. Your engine is overheated. What do you do now?

Cars can overheat for many reasons, says George Carmignani, a traffic safety consultant in Albuquerque, N. M. Some of the most common reasons include a clogged radiator that has not been flushed and refilled with clean fluid or a broken thermostat that doesn't allow the fluid to circulate and cool the engine.

Susan Hunter, of Richardson, Texas, had an overheated car last summer when temper-

atures often rose above 110 degrees. "I was driving home from work when I noticed steam coming from under the hood, so I pulled off the road. The car was towed to my mechanic and he found a broken thermostat," she recalls. "Luckily, the engine hadn't gotten hot enough to do any damage."

If there's not enough engine oil in the motor, if the oil is old and thick, or if the oil filter is clogged because it hasn't been changed in a long time, the engine can overheat. Another possibility is that the water pump is leaking fluid or is broken. Or the fan belt may be loose or broken.

A little preventive maintenance goes a long way to help you avoid an overheated engine. Inspect the radiator hoses regularly by opening the hood when the engine is turned off and has cooled down. Look for cracks and bulges. Check the fan belt that connects the engine to the radiator fan for cuts and too much wear. If your car has belts to drive the air conditioner and water pump, check those too. And before you start the engine on a hot day, make sure the radiator fluid and engine oil levels are full.

If your car overheats, turn off the air conditioner, pull off the road, turn off the ignition, raise the hood, and let things cool down for at least 30 minutes. Check the hoses for leaks and check the level of fluid in the plastic radiator fluid reservoir. Refill the reservoir if needed. Don't remove the radiator cap — the steam may burn you. □