

# Hypermilers

## *Dangerous or Green?*

by Pete Hanley

For decades, American drivers have been inundated with tips on how to increase gas mileage. You know the drill: keep your tires properly inflated, give up those jackrabbit starts, clean the air filter regularly and so on. These are all great ideas but, depending on the implementation, returns may vary from being beneficial to so-so or negligible.

With rising gasoline prices, new initiatives on fuel efficiency and worldwide efforts to decrease humanity's carbon footprint, we could use a new approach to help ordinary drivers squeeze extra mileage from their vehicles.

### One answer? Hypermiling

Hypermiling has actually been practiced for years but only by a relatively small group of avid drivers. As a result, most people are probably not familiar with the term. A hypermiler is a driver who seeks to exceed the EPA fuel economy rating for the car he or she drives. While there are a variety of methods used by hypermilers to increase gas mileage, most involve one action that is ridiculously simple—keeping an eye on your right foot.

### Ordinary cars—extraordinary drivers

Many critics consider hypermilers to be tightwad eccentrics. In general, however, hypermilers are just ordinary people,

not scientists or professional automobile mileage experts. They don't use gadgets or gizmos to increase mileage. Most drive ordinary cars, although some choose the newer hybrids. And some of these ordinary cars manage to attain 60, 80 or even 100 MPG. How do hypermilers do this? By being extraordinary drivers.

Most hypermilers utilize a combination of art and science to achieve increased gas mileage. They categorize themselves as very safe drivers, using the term "hyperconscious" to describe their driving style. Because they are acutely aware of everything going on around them, they may just be the ultimate defensive drivers.<sup>1</sup>

However, some of the tactics used by hypermilers leave other drivers shaking their heads or their fists at "those oddballs." While many hypermilers successfully decrease their gas mileage, the practice can also be a double-edged sword. When not executed properly, the actions of hypermilers can be disruptive or dangerous to other drivers. The following table depicts some of the most common methods used by hypermilers to increase gas efficiency (the "up" side) and some concerns that have been expressed by hypermiling critics (the "down" side).





Rev 'er up (well, not really)

Back 'er down

Drive at or slightly below the speed limit. Highway driving is a challenge—75 mph increases fuel consumption as much as 20% over driving 55 mph and driving 55 mph instead of 65 mph could increase your mileage 10-15%.\* Avid hypermilers drive considerably below posted highway limits (but watch minimum limits).

Driving slowly increases the mpg numbers but makes hypermilers less popular with other drivers. Some people have little appreciation for a slow driver and may take out their frustration by speeding or other aggressive behavior.

Reduce vehicular weight and/or “drag” by removing unnecessary items from the vehicle (the dog food in the trunk, bike racks, roof-top carriers, etc.).

A true hypermiler reduces all extra weight in the vehicle. Extra passengers and/or heavy cargo are usually removed from the vehicle.

Turn off the distractions. No phone, no radio, no texting. Pay attention to the road and location of your vehicle.

Even critics could agree that this is probably a good idea.

Maintain tires at or slightly above the recommended inflation limit. Hypermilers contend that a slightly overinflated tire creates less “drag” and yields better mileage.

Critics believe overinflation of tires can lead to a greater chance of blowout. It can also lead to tire wear, poor handling and an increased potential for accidents.

Drafting behind other vehicles. This involves traveling close to the vehicle in front of yours to take advantage of the slipstream (air current), thus decreasing the drag on the second vehicle.

Critics claim that drafting is tailgating and shouldn't be practiced anytime, by anyone, including hypermilers. Remember the 3-second limit and stick to it!

Don't allow your car to idle for a long period of time. A hypermiler will stop the engine if there is a line at the bank drive-through or during a traffic jam.

Some claim that stopping your car leaves you defenseless should you need to get out of the way quickly.

Stop the engine and coast down hills.

This practice is considered to be one of the most dangerous utilized by hypermilers and is definitely not recommended.

Use cruise control whenever possible. This allows you to cut down on unnecessary speed changes, which can eat up gas and prevent “speed creep,” the tendency for a driver's average speed to gradually increase over time.

While cruise control is probably most helpful during highway driving, its use in town is questionable due to lower speed limits, volume of traffic and the unpredictability of other drivers.

Ride the ridges. Hypermilers claim that indentations in the road's surface caused by constant traffic are a major cause of low gas mileage. By driving slightly to one side of the traffic lane, hypermilers avoid tire drag caused by indentations.

Critics claim that riding the ridges can confuse other drivers, who may wonder if the hypermiler is about to swerve into a different lane.

Turn off air conditioning. Using a car's air conditioner is a major cause of poor gas mileage. Hypermilers also keep windows up, cracking them slightly in hot weather.

Some argue that becoming overheated is not a good idea and that aggressive behavior increases in direct proportion to bodily discomfort.

Be aware of your right foot—the source of jackrabbit starts and stops. A hypermiler gently steps on the gas pedal and brings the car up to speed slowly. When possible, instead of braking, the hypermiler lets up on the gas and uses the car's momentum to propel it forward. When approaching stoplights or signs, the hypermiler allows the car to “coast” to a stop. The ultimate situation involves coasting until the light changes and then slowly accelerating to get through the light. A true hypermiler tries to “time” the lights in order to keep rolling.<sup>2</sup>

With the engine fully engaged, a hypermiler can react quickly if a problem develops. The greatest danger comes when other drivers become irritated by a hypermiler's slow approach to a signal and drive aggressively in order to pass. Another problem to note occurs when a hypermiler merely “nods at” a stop sign instead of coming to a full stop. Although plenty of non-hypermilers practice this, it's still illegal and should not become part of a hypermiler's gas-saving arsenal.

Saving fuel and conservation are highly important, but safety is the number one factor that should be considered by anyone who gets behind the wheel. Critics and detractors have legitimate concerns regarding the practices used by hypermilers. "For the most part, hypermiling encourages non-aggressive driving," says Geoff Sundstrom, director of AAA Public Affairs. "Driving the speed limit and not speeding up to stop signs are all good things—these are things that we teach new drivers."<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted that many techniques used by hypermilers are not suitable for day-to-day driving on city streets and highways. Because these drivers promote safe driving practices, the great majority of them use the most extreme measures only on closed courses during mileage trials.<sup>2</sup> But it's possible for ordinary drivers to adopt many of the less dangerous techniques, which have the potential to increase mileage and stay safe. Try, for example, to curb the desire to beat other cars away from a red light, fight the urge to speed up to get to the next light first and remember to let up on the gas if the stoplight immediately ahead turns red. These sound like insignificant changes, but every small step you take adds up—and may result in big overall savings.

Hypermilers believe that if everyone drove more responsibly and squeezed the most miles possible from every gallon of gas, America's dependency on foreign oil could decrease significantly. At the very least, becoming more aware of how you drive and making every attempt to conserve fuel can be a good thing, for safety, the environment and your pocketbook.

The key seems to be respect for everyone on the road. Let's all do our best to promote safer driving by everyone!

More information on hypermiling can be accessed at [www.cleanmpg.com](http://www.cleanmpg.com). You can find a short history of fuel economy standards plus more tips and tactics for saving fuel and increasing mileage.

\* eartheasy Website, [www.eartheasy.com/live\\_fuel\\_efficient\\_driving.htm](http://www.eartheasy.com/live_fuel_efficient_driving.htm), accessed March 16, 2009.

1 [www.cleanmpg.com/cmeps\\_index.php?page=hypermiling](http://www.cleanmpg.com/cmeps_index.php?page=hypermiling)

2 Valdes-Dapena, Peter, "Take it Slow and save big on gas," CNNMoney.com, May 9, 2006, accessed March 26, 2009 at [http://money.cnn.com/2006/05/01/Autos/driving\\_for\\_mpg/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2006/05/01/Autos/driving_for_mpg/index.htm)

3 Diken, Chris and Erica Francis, "Ten fuel-saving tips from a hypermiler: Wayne Gerdes wrings every last mile out of his gasoline tank," msnbc Business, September 11, 2007, accessed March 26, 2009 at [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20706595/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20706595/)