

Massachusetts Anti-Idling Law

Frequently Asked Questions

(Taken from Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection website)

The goal of the Massachusetts Anti-Idling law is to improve air quality by reducing unnecessary air pollution from idling vehicles. The law limits unnecessary engine idling to five minutes. The following questions and answers are intended to help drivers determine when engine idling could be considered necessary and when they should shut the engines down.

Why is there an anti-idling law? It's basic common sense: there is already too much pollution in the air. Massachusetts consistently has days when air pollution exceeds ozone standards.

Am I causing more pollution by stopping and starting the engine? No. Once the engine has warmed up, an idling engine causes more pollution by running than by stopping and starting up again. Studies indicate that the trade-off for light- and medium-duty gasoline powered vehicles is about 10 seconds (i.e. the vehicle will produce more pollution idling longer than 10 seconds than it will by shutting down and restarting the engine).

Won't I wear out my starter if I keep stopping and starting the engine? Fleet managers of companies with strict anti-idling policies report that they do not replace starters in their vehicles more frequently than vehicles that are left running for extended periods. In fact, more damage occurs to engines that are left idling over long periods of time.

Is all engine idling prohibited? No. While the law does prohibit unnecessary idling, it also recognizes that there are times when idling is simply unavoidable and lists three specific exemptions: when an engine is being repaired and operating the engine is necessary for the repair; when a vehicle is making deliveries and associated power is necessary; and when the engine is used to provide power to another device.

Are there other times when it's OK to idle not listed in the law? The law prohibits unnecessary idling, then lists three exemptions to that rule. So there are other times when idling is permitted as long as the idling is absolutely necessary. For example, running the engine to operate the windshield defroster to clear a windshield of ice on an extremely cold day is a good example of necessary idling. It's a safety problem if you cannot see where you're going and if the windshield is not warm enough to melt snow and freezing rain while driving. Running the engine while actively clearing snow and ice off the vehicle and to warm the windshield and interior of the vehicle is necessary idling. Our common sense also tells us that heaters and air conditioning units almost always bring the vehicle's interior into a comfortable range in a short time. We also know that heaters and air conditioning units work faster when the vehicle is being driven, not when it is left idling. So most vehicles, most of the time, will reach a comfortable temperature within the first five minutes of driving.

What are a few examples of unnecessary idling?

- Sitting in your car in a parking lot with the engine on during mild or cool weather is unnecessary. The interior of your car will stay warm for 5 to 10 minutes on all but the coldest days.
- Leaving the vehicle running while unattended to let the heater warm it or the air conditioner cool it for extended periods of time is unnecessary idling (it is also in violation of traffic law). Five minutes should be the maximum amount of time unless weather conditions are extreme, and the engine should not be left running while the vehicle is unattended for any length of time.
- Operating devices not related to transporting passengers or goods. Letting the engine run for an hour or more to play a movie or to charge a cell phone causes unnecessary pollution, is a nuisance for others nearby and puts excessive wear and tear on the engine.

For further information: www.mass.gov/dep/