

Registering and renewing your car

Easy · 20 min online · Varies by state and car

Your car needs current registration every year or two. Renewal notices usually come a couple of months early, but the deadline is yours to watch. Have proof of insurance and any required inspection done first. Moved to a new state? You usually have only a few weeks to register there.

YOU'LL NEED

- ☐ Your current registration card or renewal notice
- ☐ Proof of insurance
- ☐ An inspection or smog certificate, if your state or county requires one
- ☐ A card to pay fees

WHAT TO KNOW

- 1 **Find your state's DMV.** Every state runs its own; USAGov links to each one.
- 2 **Check the exact date.** In California, your plate sticker shows only the month and year, but the registration expires on a specific day; it's on your registration card.
- 3 **Watch for the notice, but don't wait on it.** California mails a renewal notice about 60 days before your registration expires; if yours doesn't come, contact the DMV or use its fee calculator.
- 4 **Get the inspection done first if you need one.** In Texas, for example, you must pass any required inspection before renewing. Safety inspections ended for most cars in 2025, but 17 counties, including Dallas, Harris and Travis, still require an emissions test.
- 5 **Have proof of insurance ready.** Texas asks for your insurance card and lists minimums of \$30,000 per injured person, \$60,000 per crash and \$25,000 for property damage. See Auto insurance basics.
- 6 **Renew online when you can.** Texas lets you renew online from 90 days before expiration up to 12 months after, if you haven't gotten a ticket for expired registration.
- 7 **Moving states?** Register soon. Texas gives new residents 30 days. Bring proof you own the car, like your old registration or title, plus your insurance card. Update your address too; see Changing your address and forwarding mail.

Watch out Late costs money. California charges penalties on top of your fees if you pay after the expiration date, and the longer you wait, the bigger the penalty.

DAD NOTE Put the expiration date in your phone with a two-week warning. Expired tags are an easy way to turn a normal drive into a traffic stop.

Full lesson: aptkeys.com/your-place/car-ownership/registering-and-renewing-your-car/

Checked October 3, 2026. Sources: USAGov; California DMV; Texas Department of Motor Vehicles.