

Wheels: We had several letters from readers about ride and suspensions including a letter from Harold of Dayton who asks if there is anything that can be done to improve the ride of his 1995 Chrysler Cirrus. He states that the car has 87,000 miles and is very solid, yet he feels every bump. Do you have any suggestions?

Halderman: The first thing I would check is the tire pressure. If the tires are over inflated (too much air) the ride will be harsh. Always inflate the tires to the recommended inflation pressure as stated on the door placard or in the owner's manual. There is often a recommendation for a normal inflation pressure and a note to increase the pressure 2 psi to 4 psi if the vehicle is to be driven fully loaded and/or at highway speed for an extended period time. Some service technicians inflate tires to the specified higher pressure in the event that the driver will be driving for extended time at highway speed and/or carry a full load of passengers and luggage.

Wheels: Harold also stated that he looked for special smoother riding shocks and could only find original equipment shock absorbers.

Halderman: Unfortunately, softer ride replacement shock absorbers are not available. However, standard replacement shock absorbers will often cure a harsh ride. Many people think that shocks just keep the vehicle from bouncing after riding over a dip in the road but the shocks also help smooth the ride. The springs on the vehicle support the weight and the shocks control the springs. When the shocks wear, they are unable to control the springs. As a result, the ride becomes harsher than normal. Therefore, if the ride was acceptable when the vehicle was new and the tires are properly inflated, then I would suggest replacing all shocks and/or struts. Struts serve the same purpose as shock absorbers but are also a structural part of the suspension. Struts are usually more expensive than standard shock absorbers. "Strut" is short for MacPherson strut named after its inventor, Earle S. MacPherson.

Wheels: What type of suspension should a reader look for when purchasing a vehicle if a smooth ride is needed?

Halderman: For the best ride, try to avoid purchasing a vehicle that uses leaf springs. Coil springs or torsion bar suspensions are generally smoother riding. Also try to select a vehicle with an independent rear suspension. This means that when a rear wheel hits a bump, just that one wheel moves upward and does not affect the other wheels like can occur on a vehicle that uses a solid or straight axle rear suspension. Four-wheel-drive vehicles usually ride firmer than two-wheel-drive versions of the same vehicle. Truck and sport utility vehicles (SUVs) are usually built to be able to haul a heavy load and as a result the suspension is stiff and may ride harshly even though the vehicle itself seems large and heavy.

The best advice I can give would be to rent a similar vehicle before purchasing so you can experience for yourself how the vehicle handles under a variety of road surfaces and conditions. Different brands of vehicles can ride totally differently even when equipped with the same type of suspensions.

