FREE VIN CHECK

How to run a **free VIN check** that actually tells you something: check a VIN number free with NHTSA, NICB and state tools, get a **free VIN lookup** and history preview with no credit card, dodge trial traps, and know when a $14.99 report beats hunting for a free Carfax.

Free	5	$14.99
VIN lookup & history preview, no credit card	free NICB VINCheck searches per 24 hours	full report; Carfax widely quoted at $44.99

CarCheckerVIN

www.carcheckervin.com/free-vin-check

Free VIN check · Free VIN lookup · Vehicle history reports

START HERE

ABOUT THIS FREE VIN CHECK GUIDE

A **free VIN check** can tell you a lot about a used car before you spend a cent: what it really is, whether a safety recall is still open, whether an insurer reported it stolen or wrote it off, and whether a state has branded its title. This guide shows you how to **check a VIN number free** with every genuinely free tool, what each one misses, and how to recognize "free" offers that end in a monthly charge.

It is published by **CarCheckerVIN (carcheckervin.com)**, which runs a free VIN lookup with a free vehicle history preview and sells full reports for $14.99. Each free tool in these pages was checked in November 2026 against its operator's own material: NHTSA, the National Insurance Crime Bureau, the Justice Department's NMVTIS program, state motor vehicle agencies, the Federal Trade Commission and the text of federal law. Where we couldn't confirm a detail, we left it out rather than guess.

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FREE VIN CHECK

Run a free VIN check while you read

Enter any 17-character VIN or a U.S. license plate at **carcheckervin.com/free-vin-check** to see the decoded vehicle and a free preview of the history records on file. No card, no account. The full vehicle history report is a one-time $14.99, with no subscription.

How to use this guide

Buying this week
Read Chapters 2, 9 and 14, run the free checks on every car, then buy reports only for your finalists.

Got a strange charge?
Chapters 11 and 11b explain trial-to-subscription offers, your rights under federal law, and how to cancel or dispute.

Weighing a Carfax
Chapters 12, 12b and 13 cover the free Carfax routes that work, and when a cheaper report does the job.

BUYER'S SHORTCUT

WHERE TO CHECK A VIN FREE & WHERE TO BUY THE REPORT

Several checks really are free; a complete history isn't. Here is where to get each piece, so you never pay for what the government gives away.

OUR PICK

CarCheckerVIN · www.carcheckervin.com

- **Free VIN lookup:** year, make, model, engine, plant
- **Free history preview,** no credit card
- **Full report: $14.99**, one-time, no subscription
- **Packs:** 3 for $35.99, 5 for $54.99, 10 for $89.99
- Title brands, NMVTIS records, odometer, owners
- Total-loss records, liens, impounds, auction photos
- Recalls, service records, specs, market value
- Search by VIN, U.S. plate or a list of VINs

Run a free VIN check at carcheckervin.com/free-vin-check →

Free VIN checks and paid reports compared

Where	Cost	What it answers	Main limit
CarCheckerVIN	Free; report $14.99	Specs and record counts	Details in the full report
NHTSA recall lookup	Free	Unrepaired recalls, by VIN or plate	15-year window; some small makers
NICB VINCheck	Free	Open thefts; insurer total losses	5 searches a day; member insurers
NHTSA vPIC decoder	Free	Factory specs, plant, check digit	No history at all
State title search	Free in some states	That state's own title record	Blind to every other state
NMVTIS report	From a couple of dollars	Title brands, last odometer, total loss	Concise; no auction or service data
Carfax	Widely quoted at $44.99	Strongest on service records	Price; free mostly via dealers

How to choose a free VIN check

- ☐ It shows you results **before** it asks for a card.
- ☐ It names its sources: NHTSA, NICB, NMVTIS, state records.
- ☐ Any upgrade has a printed one-time price, not a trial.
- ☐ Title brands come from every state, not one.
- ☐ You can search by plate when an ad hides the VIN.
- ☐ Packs are offered if you're comparing several cars.

Comparing a shortlist? Run the free checks on every car, then buy reports only for the two or three that pass; a 3-pack ($35.99) costs less than one Carfax.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT A FREE VIN CHECK REALLY IS

A VIN check is any search that uses a vehicle identification number to pull records about one vehicle. “Free” gets attached to very different things, so know which one you're looking at.

Free VIN lookup, free VIN check, free VIN report

Term	What you actually get	Is it free?
Free VIN lookup (decoder)	Year, make, model, engine, body and plant read from the 17 characters	Yes, everywhere. Never pay for a decode.
Free VIN check	A screen for problems: open recalls, insurer theft and total-loss records, a state title brand	Yes, via NHTSA, NICB and some states
Free VIN report	Usually a preview: the vehicle plus a few record counts	The preview is free; the details usually aren't
Vehicle history report	A dated timeline: titles, mileage, owners, liens, auctions	Paid: $14.99 at CarCheckerVIN

The three layers of a used-car check

1 · Identity
Is this the car the ad describes? A VIN decoder answers it from manufacturer data. **Free.**

2 · Safety
Is a recall still open? Was it reported stolen or totaled by an insurer? NHTSA and NICB answer these. **Free.**

3 · History
Brands from every state, mileage over time, owners, liens, auctions. **Mostly paid.**

Why some vehicle data is free and some isn’t

Safety data is published by the government. Makers must file their VIN coding with NHTSA and recalls are public, so NHTSA gives both away. NICB, an insurer-backed nonprofit, offers VINCheck free.

Title records belong to the states. Brand, odometer and total-loss data are pooled in NMVTIS, the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System run by the U.S. Department of Justice. The public reaches it through approved data providers, who charge for reports; Ohio's title-search page says government agencies are prohibited from sharing NMVTIS data with the public.

Everything else is gathered commercially. Auction sales and photos, service visits, lien filings and odometer readings are collected and matched to VINs by data companies. That work is what a paid report pays for.

A useful rule of thumb

If a free tool tells you what the car is, or whether a recall is open, it's doing its job. If a site says it found “records” but won't show them without payment, that's a **preview**, not a free report. Previews are fine, and useful, as long as the site says so plainly and doesn't need your card to show you one.

What no VIN check can do: inspect the car. That's why the Texas DMV recommends a trusted mechanic look at it before you pay or sign anything.

CHAPTER 2

HOW TO RUN A FREE VIN CHECK IN 7 STEPS

You can cover identity, recalls, insurer records and one state's title without paying anything. Do it in this order, because each step can save you the next one.

First, make sure the VIN is real

Every road vehicle built for model year 1981 or later carries a 17-character VIN. The letters I, O and Q are never used, the 9th character is a check digit on North American vehicles, and the 10th is the model year. If the number you were given breaks any of those rules, it's a typo or a fake, and no free VIN check will return anything useful until you fix it.

1. **Read the VIN off the car.** Use the plate at the base of the windshield on the driver's side and the label on the driver's door jamb. Both must match each other, the title and the registration. A VIN copied from an ad is where most typos (and some scams) start.
2. **Decode it free.** Enter it at **carcheckervin.com/vin-decoder** or NHTSA's vPIC decoder. The year, model, body and engine must match the listing. If the ad says V6 and the VIN says four-cylinder, stop and ask why.
3. **Run a free recall check by VIN.** NHTSA's lookup at nhtsa.gov/recalls takes a VIN or a plate and lists safety recalls that haven't been repaired. Repairs are free at franchised dealers.
4. **Run NICB VINCheck.** It shows whether participating insurers reported the vehicle stolen and not recovered, or as a salvage or flood total loss. You get 5 searches per 24 hours.
5. **Use the state's own title search,** if the car is titled in a state that offers one free (Chapter 7 covers Ohio, Florida and New York).
6. **Run the CarCheckerVIN free history preview** at **carcheckervin.com/free-vin-check** to see damage, auction-sale and recall counts, with no card.
7. **Decide.** Drop any car that fails a free check. Buy a $14.99 full report on the ones you'd actually buy, then book an independent inspection for the winner.

Your free VIN check worksheet

Check	Free tool	Write down
Decoded year, model, engine match the ad	CarCheckerVIN or vPIC	Any mismatch
Open safety recalls	NHTSA recall lookup	Campaign numbers
Stolen or insurer total loss	NICB VINCheck	Record type and date
Brand on the current state title	State title search, where offered	Brand wording
Damage, auction and recall counts	CarCheckerVIN preview	How many of each

No VIN, no deal. A seller who won't give you the VIN before you travel to see the car is telling you something. If an ad only shows the plate, a plate search at **carcheckervin.com/license-plate-lookup** finds the VIN first. More hiding places for the VIN: **carcheckervin.com/where-is-the-vin-number-on-a-car**.

CHAPTER 3

CARCHECKERVIN FREE VIN LOOKUP & HISTORY PREVIEW

CarCheckerVIN is this guide's featured free option because it joins two things most free tools keep apart: a free VIN lookup, and a free look at whether there's any history worth paying for.

What's free, with no card

- **Decoded vehicle:** year, make, model, trim, engine, drive type and assembly plant.
- **History preview:** which records are on file for that VIN before you pay anything.
- **Three ways in:** a 17-character VIN, a U.S. license plate, or a pasted list of VINs.
- **No account, no trial:** nothing to cancel later, because nothing starts.

What the $14.99 report adds

- Title records and state title brands (salvage, junk, rebuilt, flood, lemon buyback) and NMVTIS title records
- Odometer readings and owner count
- Insurance total-loss records, lien history and impound information
- Auction sales with photos
- Service records, open recalls, factory specs and a market value estimate

Free preview vs full report

	Free lookup & preview	Full report, $14.99
Year, make, model, trim, engine, plant	✓	✓
Whether history records exist	✓	✓
Title brands with states and dates	–	✓
Odometer readings over time	–	✓
Liens, impounds, total-loss records	–	✓
Auction sales with photos	–	✓

Prices, all one-time

Option	Price	Per report	Good for
Single report	$14.99	$14.99	The one car you're about to buy
3-pack	$35.99	$12	A shortlist; costs less than one Carfax
5-pack	$54.99	$11	A long search; costs less than two Carfax reports
10-pack	$89.99	$9	Flippers, families, small lots

Why a preview first: you see whether records exist before you pay, and spend money only on the car with something to read.

MORE FREE

Refer a friend, get a free report: **carcheckervin.com/refer**. Dealers: **/dealers**.

CHAPTER 4

NHTSA VPIC: THE OFFICIAL FREE VIN LOOKUP

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration runs the government's own decoder at vpic.nhtsa.dot.gov. It is the reference point for every **free VIN lookup**: it shows exactly what the manufacturer reported, and nothing else.

Where the data comes from

Federal rules (49 CFR 565.16) require each manufacturer to give NHTSA the information needed to decipher its VINs, generally at least 60 days before it offers the first vehicle with that coding for sale, and to file amendments when the coding changes. NHTSA's decoder page says plainly that what it displays is reported by the manufacturer. It accepts partial VINs, shows the plant and country of manufacture, and rejects pre-1981 serial numbers.

A real free decode, November 2026

```
VIN: "4T1B11HK8KU123456"
ModelYear: "2019"    Make: "TOYOTA"    Model: "Camry"    Trim: "L/LE/SE/XLE"
BodyClass: "Sedan/Saloon"    DisplacementL: "2.5"    EngineCylinders: "4"    EngineHP: "203"
TransmissionStyle: "Automatic"    TransmissionSpeeds: "8"    DriveType: "4x2"
PlantCity: "GEORGETOWN"    PlantState: "KENTUCKY"    GVWR: "Class 1C: 4,001 - 5,000 lb"
ErrorCode: "0"    ErrorText: "VIN decoded clean. Check Digit (9th position) is correct"
```

An excerpt from NHTSA's batch decoder response. The full record has more than 150 fields; for this VIN it also listed airbag locations and driver-assistance equipment. The serial number (positions 12–17) is illustrative; the check digit is valid.

The same VIN with one wrong character

We changed only the 9th character, from 8 to 9. NHTSA still described a 2019 Camry, but returned error code 1: *Check Digit (9th position) does not calculate properly*. That's the lesson: a mistyped VIN can still decode to a believable car. The check-digit verdict, not the model name, is what tells you the number is wrong.

What vPIC shows, free

- Year, make, model and series
- Body class, doors and seats
- Engine size, cylinders, fuel and power
- Transmission and drive type
- Plant city, state and country
- Airbags and safety equipment
- A check-digit and format verdict

What it can’t show

- Title brands, total losses or theft
- Odometer readings
- Owners, liens or auction sales
- Open recalls (that's a separate NHTSA tool)
- An exact trim, when several share one pattern
- Options, colors or original price
- Anything that happened after the factory

FREE DECODER + PREVIEW

CarCheckerVIN's free decoder starts from the same manufacturer-reported data, then adds a free preview of the history records on file: **carcheckervin.com/vin-decoder**.

CHAPTER 5

FREE RECALL CHECK BY VIN

A **free recall check by VIN** is the easiest win in used-car buying. It costs nothing and tells you whether the car still has a safety defect the maker has promised to fix for free.

How NHTSA's recall lookup works

Go to nhtsa.gov/recalls and enter the 17-character VIN, or the license plate and state. The lookup lists safety recalls that apply to that exact vehicle and haven't been repaired. Recall repairs are free at franchised dealers of that brand, whoever owns the car now and however many times it has been sold.

What the VIN lookup leaves out

Gap	What to do about it
Recalls more than 15 years old	Check the manufacturer's own owner website, which may show older campaigns, or ask a franchised dealer to run the VIN.
Some small or ultra-luxury makers	Contact the manufacturer directly with the VIN.
Very new recalls not yet loaded	Re-run the check just before you buy, not weeks earlier.
Service campaigns and warranty extensions that aren't safety recalls	A franchised dealer's service desk can tell you what the VIN is owed.



Enter the VIN or plate
At nhtsa.gov/recalls, or with CarCheckerVIN's recall page.



Read each open campaign
Note the component and whether a remedy is available yet.



Get it fixed free
Any franchised dealer of the brand; ask the seller for repair paperwork.

Using a recall result when you buy

An open recall isn't automatically a deal-breaker. The repair is free. What matters is the defect, whether the fix is available yet, and whether the car is safe to drive until then.

Ask the seller to fix it first, or to show the dealer's paperwork if they say it's done. A recall marked as repaired in the dealer system drops off the lookup.

Run the check twice: once when you first see the ad, and again on the day you buy, because new recalls are added all the time.

Owners, too: check your own VIN a few times a year; you needn't be the first owner to get the repair.

RECALL CHECK

Check recalls free at **carcheckervin.com/recall-check**. Open recalls are also listed in every CarCheckerVIN full report, next to the title and odometer records.

CHAPTER 6

NICB VIN CHECK: FREE STOLEN & TOTAL-LOSS SCREEN

The National Insurance Crime Bureau's VINCheck at nicb.org/vincheck is the best-known **NICB VIN check**, and one of the few free tools that looks at insurance records. It's quick, it's free, and it's narrower than most people assume.

What VINCheck shows

- **Stolen and not recovered:** a theft reported by a participating insurer that hasn't been closed by a recovery.
- **Salvage or flood total loss:** a vehicle a participating insurer declared a total loss.
- **Some motorcycles and watercraft,** as well as cars and trucks.

The ground rules

- Free, with no account.
- 5 searches per 24 hours from one IP address.
- Participating insurers write 92.49% of earned U.S. premium.
- NICB says plainly that VINCheck is not a full vehicle history report.

What it can't see

- **Recovered thefts.** It flags vehicles stolen and *not* recovered, so a car that was stolen, found and repaired isn't flagged as stolen.
- **Non-participating insurers** and uninsured vehicles: if no participating insurer handled the loss, there's nothing to report.
- **State title brands** that didn't start with an insurer, such as a lemon buyback.
- **Odometer readings, liens, owners and auction sales.**
- **Damage repaired without a claim.**

Reading a VINCheck result

Result	What it means	What to do
No records found	No participating insurer reported a theft or total loss	Good, but keep going: check the title and a full history
Total-loss record	An insurer paid it out as salvage or flood loss	Expect a brand on the title; ask for repair records and get an inspection
Stolen, not recovered	An open theft record for this VIN	Don't buy. Don't hand over money. Contact local police

Make your 5 searches count. Run VINCheck after you've decoded the VIN and confirmed it matches the car, not on every ad. A typo burns a search and returns a meaningless "no records".

NICB vs a paid report

The two overlap only at insurance total losses. A $14.99 CarCheckerVIN report adds NMVTIS brands from every state, odometer readings, liens, impounds and auction photos, but it doesn't replace VINCheck for open thefts, so run both. Walkthrough: **carcheckervin.com/nicb-vin-check**.

CHAPTER 7

FREE TITLE CHECK: STATE TOOLS THAT WORK

A title brand (salvage, rebuilt, flood, junk) changes a car's value, its insurability and sometimes whether it can be driven at all. A few states let anyone run a **free title check** against their own records. Here are three free state tools, one state that sends you to paid NMVTIS vendors instead, and the catch they all share.

OHIO · BUREAU OF MOTOR VEHICLES

Ohio BMV Title Search

Searches by title number or VIN, with tabs for boat hull numbers (HIN) and outboard motors. Its disclaimer is frank: results cover **only titles issued in Ohio** and don't show whether the vehicle was titled elsewhere. Title clerks get other states' brand history through NMVTIS, but government agencies are prohibited from sharing NMVTIS data with the public, so it isn't shown. More: **carcheckervin.com/ohio-car-title-search**.

FLORIDA · FLHSMV

Florida Vehicle Information Check

The Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles runs a free Vehicle Information Check that takes a Florida title number or a VIN, behind a CAPTCHA and with no account. It verifies Florida's own title and registration records. A car titled in Florida only recently may have a past elsewhere that this check can't see. More: **carcheckervin.com/florida-car-title-search**.

NEW YORK · DMV

New York “Check a Title or Lien Status”

New York's DMV service takes the VIN plus the model year and make, and returns the date the title was issued and lien information for New York titles, with no personal owner information. It answers “is there a loan on this car?”, not “what happened to it?”. More: **carcheckervin.com/new-york-car-title-search**.

TEXAS · TXDMV

Texas “Title Check – Look before you buy”

Rather than a free public search, TxDMV's Title Check page sends buyers to Justice Department-approved NMVTIS vendors, noting prices begin at only a couple of dollars. It also recommends a complete history report and a mechanic's inspection. More: **carcheckervin.com/texas-car-title-search**.

The catch: one state sees one state

A free state title check reads that state's records. Used cars cross state lines all the time, and a brand applied in one state can fail to follow the car into another. To see brands from every state, you need NMVTIS data, which reaches the public only through approved providers and the reports built on them (next page).

Elsewhere, rules and fees differ by state, so check your agency's own site. State-by-state pages: **carcheckervin.com/car-title-check**.

CHAPTER 7 CONT.

NMVTIS & TITLE WASHING: THE NATIONAL TITLE CHECK

NMVTIS is the closest thing the U.S. has to a national title database. It isn't free to consumers, but it is the piece that makes a title check work across state lines, and it's cheap.

How NMVTIS reaches you

The National Motor Vehicle Title Information System is run by the U.S. Department of Justice through its Bureau of Justice Assistance. Consumers buy NMVTIS reports from approved data providers listed at vehiclehistory.bja.ojp.gov; examples on that list include VinAudit, ClearVin, EpicVin, GoodCar, Bumper and carVertical. The Justice Department notes that consumers **cannot** get NMVTIS reports from Carfax, DMVDesk or Experian, which provide NMVTIS data to dealers only.

What an NMVTIS report shows

- The current title state and brand
- Brand history from other states
- The last odometer reading recorded at titling
- Insurance total-loss determinations
- Junk and salvage yard records

What the Justice Department warns

- The report is concise on purpose.
- NMVTIS doesn't hold everything a state keeps in its title file.
- A search can return a false negative, such as “no junk or salvage history”.
- Brand rules vary by state, so check the state's full title record too.

Title washing: why one-state checks fail

“Washing” a title means re-titling a branded car through other states until the brand drops off. The Texas DMV's flood-damage guide warns that some sellers re-title flood vehicles through other states to remove the brand, that some states don't put flood brands on titles at all, and that some brand a flooded car “rebuilt” rather than “flood damaged”. It tells buyers to be suspicious when a title history shows the car registered in several states in a short time, or an insurance company listed as an owner.

Title brand	What it usually signals (exact definitions vary by state)
Salvage	Damaged enough that an insurer or the state treated it as a loss; often can't be registered until repaired and inspected
Rebuilt	A former salvage vehicle repaired and passed for the road; the brand normally stays for life
Flood	Water damage reported; electrical and corrosion problems can surface for years
Junk / non-repairable	Meant for parts or scrap, not for road use again
Lemon buyback	Repurchased by the maker under a state lemon law

ALL STATES

Every CarCheckerVIN full report includes NMVTIS title records and state title brands, alongside odometer readings, insurance total-loss records and auction sales with photos, for $14.99. See **carcheckervin.com/nmvtis-vin-check** and **carcheckervin.com/salvage-title-check**.

CHAPTER 8

IS THERE A FREE VEHICLE HISTORY REPORT?

Short answer: not a complete one, on demand, for any VIN you choose. You can read some full reports free, and you can assemble a decent picture from free tools. Here is what's real.

Ways to read a full report without paying

1. **The dealer's report.** Many dealers attach a free Carfax to their listings; the dealer pays for it. Ask for the link if you don't see one.
2. **A membership perk.** AAA Premier members get one free Carfax a year by phone; Classic and Plus members get a discount that varies by club.
3. **A referral.** CarCheckerVIN gives a free report when you refer a friend: carcheckervin.com/refer.
4. **The seller's copy.** A private seller may hand you a report they bought. Read it, but check the date it was run.

What "free vehicle history report" offers usually turn out to be

The offer says	What you typically get	Verdict
"Free VIN report"	A decode plus a count of records found, with details locked	A preview. Useful if no card is needed
"Free history, just enter your email"	The same preview, plus marketing email	Your email is the price
"Free report" that asks for a card	A trial or a small charge that may renew	Not free. Read the terms first
"Free Carfax generator"	Nothing real; often a data or card grab	Avoid
Free state or federal tool	One honest slice: recalls, insurer records, one state's title	Genuinely free; use it

Build your own free vehicle history report

Free tools together cover

- Identity and specs (decoder)
- Open safety recalls (NHTSA)
- Open thefts and insurer total losses (NICB)
- One state's title, where offered
- Whether records exist (CarCheckerVIN preview)

They still miss

- Brands from every other state
- The odometer timeline
- Owner count and lien history
- Auction sales and their photos
- Service records

Date every report you're shown. A report run six months ago says nothing about the months since. More: carcheckervin.com/can-i-check-a-cars-history-for-free and /free-vin-report.

CHAPTER 9

BEST FREE VIN CHECK, RANKED

There's no single **best free VIN check**; there's a best order. We ranked the free options by how much a buyer learns per minute, using five tests: real sources, results before a card, coverage, limits, and how honestly the paid upgrade is presented.

#	Free tool	Best for	Needs a card?	The catch
1	**CarCheckerVIN free check**	Identity plus damage, auction and recall counts; plate and list search	No	Record details need the $14.99 report
2	**NHTSA recall lookup**	Open safety recalls, straight from the regulator	No	Recalls only; 15-year window
3	**NICB VINCheck**	Open thefts and insurer total losses	No	5 searches a day; participating insurers only
4	**State title search**	The current title in Ohio, Florida or New York	No	One state's records
5	**NHTSA vPIC decoder**	Settling a spec argument with official data	No	No history
6	**Dealer's free Carfax**	Service history on dealer stock	No	Only where the dealer chose to buy one

Best free VIN check for your situation

Private-party sale

All four free checks, then a paid report before any money changes hands. Private sellers rarely provide a report, and there's no dealer to go back to.

Dealer lot

Read the dealer's free report, note its date, run NHTSA and NICB yourself, and add your own report if the car came from auction or another state.

Online or out-of-state listing

Free checks first, then a report that covers every state's brands. Title washing works best on buyers who only check one state.

Older car under $5,000

Free checks often carry most of the weight here, but a cheap car with a salvage brand can still cost you its whole price. A $14.99 report is small next to that.

Motorcycle or boat

NICB covers some motorcycles and watercraft. Boats use a 12-character hull number instead of a VIN (Chapter 15).

Your own car

Run the recall check a few times a year. Before selling, a fresh report helps buyers trust the price.

WHAT WE'D DO

Decode and preview at **carcheckervin.com/free-vin-check**, run NHTSA and NICB, drop anything that fails, then buy the full report for the two or three cars you'd actually buy. Compare more sites at **carcheckervin.com/compare-vin-check-websites**.

CHAPTER 10

FREE VS PAID VIN CHECK, SIDE BY SIDE

This is the whole guide on one page: what the free tools cover, what CarCheckerVIN's free preview adds, and what only the $14.99 report contains. A dash means “not provided” by that option.

Information	Free government & state tools	CarCheckerVIN free preview	CarCheckerVIN report, $14.99
Year, make, model, engine, plant	NHTSA vPIC	✓	✓
VIN format and check digit	NHTSA vPIC	✓	✓
Open safety recalls	NHTSA recall lookup	count on file	✓
Reported stolen, not recovered	NICB VINCheck	use NICB	– (use NICB)
Insurance total-loss records	NICB VINCheck (participating insurers)	in full report	✓
Title brand, one state	State title search, where offered	in full report	✓
Title brands, all states (NMVTIS)	– (paid NMVTIS report)	in full report	✓
Odometer readings over time	–	in full report	✓
Owner count	–	in full report	✓
Lien history	New York's lien status tool (NY titles)	in full report	✓
Impound information	–	in full report	✓
Auction sales with photos	–	count on file	✓
Service records	–	in full report	✓
Market value estimate	–	in full report	✓
Print-ready report	–	in full report	✓
Cost	**$0**	**$0, no card**	**$14.99, from $9 in packs**

“Whether on file” describes the preview's purpose: to show which kinds of records exist for the VIN before you pay. What the preview displays can vary by vehicle and source.

Reading the table

The free column is strong on safety. Recalls and open thefts are exactly where the government and insurers give data away, so use their tools directly; no paid report beats NHTSA for recalls or NICB for open thefts.

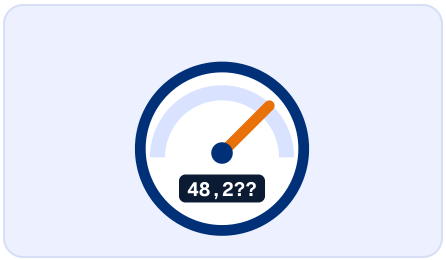
The paid column is strong on history. Brands across states, mileage over time, owners, liens and auctions require data that someone has to collect and match, which is why they cost money.

The preview is the bridge. It turns “should I pay for a report?” from a guess into a decision: if there's nothing on file to read, you've lost nothing; if there is, you know what you're buying.

Cost math: free tools plus one report is $14.99. Three reports in a pack are $35.99, less than one Carfax at the widely quoted $44.99.

WHAT ONLY A PAID REPORT SHOWS

Six kinds of record explain most bad used-car surprises, and none of them is fully available from a free tool. These are the reasons to pay $14.99 before you pay thousands.



Odometer readings over time

NHTSA estimates more than 450,000 vehicles are sold each year with false odometer readings. A timeline exposes rollbacks.



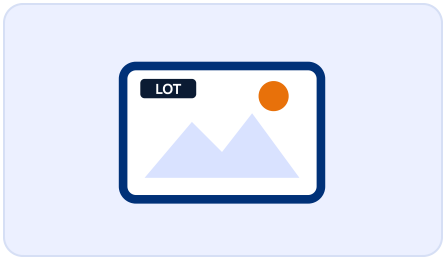
Brands from every state

NMVTIS title records follow the VIN across state lines, which is how washed titles get caught.



Liens & impounds

A car with an unpaid loan or an impound record can turn into a title you can't get.



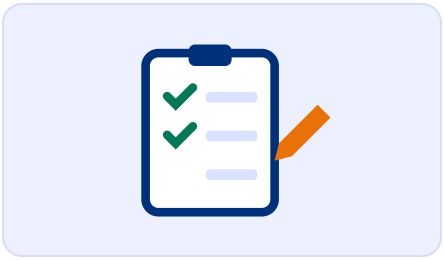
Auction sales with photos

Salvage auction photos show the car at its worst, before anyone cleaned it up.



Owner count

Many owners in a short time is worth a question, especially alongside state changes.



Service records

Maintenance visits show how the car was cared for and when mileage was logged.

Why this data costs money

Title records come from state agencies through NMVTIS, which licenses consumer access to approved providers. Auction results, auction photos, service visits and lien data are collected from businesses and matched to VINs. A free tool can give away government safety data; it can't give away data someone pays to license and maintain, at least not in detail.

Odometer law in one paragraph

Federal odometer law (49 U.S.C. Chapter 327) lets a buyer recover three times actual damages or $10,000, whichever is greater, plus attorney's fees, when intent to defraud is proven. Odometer disclosure isn't required for vehicles 20 years old or older, or model year 2010 or older, so older cars may have fewer recorded readings. Details: **carcheckervin.com/odometer-check**.

FULL REPORT

All six record types, plus open recalls, factory specs and a market value estimate, in one print-ready report for $14.99: **carcheckervin.com/vehicle-history-report**.

CHAPTER 11

HOW “FREE VIN CHECK” SITES UPSELL

Most sites that advertise a free VIN check make their money on a paid report. That's a fair business when it's disclosed. Trouble starts with a handful of design patterns that blur the line between free and paid. Learn the pattern and you'll spot it on any site.

Anatomy of a teaser funnel

1. **The search theater.** A progress bar “scans” databases with names like title, auction, theft and accident, building suspense before any result appears.
2. **The alarm count.** “7 records found” or “possible problems detected”, with no indication of what the records are. Routine registrations count as records too.
3. **The email gate.** Results are “ready”, but only after you enter an email address, which starts the marketing sequence.
4. **The card for “free”.** The free report needs a card “for verification”, or costs a token amount.
5. **The trial that renews.** The small charge starts a membership that bills monthly until you cancel, often for “unlimited” reports you didn't need.
6. **The pre-checked box.** Add-ons or ongoing charges are selected by default at checkout.
7. **The hard exit.** Sign-up took one click; cancelling takes a phone call, a chat queue or a form.

Signs, meanings and what to do

What you see	What it usually means	What to do
“Records found” with no detail	A count designed to create urgency	Ask what kind of records. A real preview tells you
Card required for a “free” report	A trial or a charge is coming	Find the renewal terms before typing a number
Price in small print under the button	The headline price isn't the real one	Read the line under every button
“Unlimited reports” for one car	A subscription you won't use	Buy one report, one time
Ad text that doesn't match the site	An affiliate ad, not the seller	Judge the site's own terms, not the ad

What the FTC says about “free” trials

The Federal Trade Commission's consumer guidance notes that a free trial usually asks for your card number so the company can bill you if you don't cancel, that a “free” trial requiring shipping or other fees isn't really free, that online ads may come from affiliate marketers rather than the seller, and that you should uncheck pre-checked boxes and mark the cancellation deadline on your calendar.

None of this means every site with a paid report is a trap. It means the free part should be free, the paid part should carry a clear one-time price, and you should be able to tell the difference before you type a card number.

CHAPTER 11 CONT.

VIN CHECK, NO CREDIT CARD: YOUR RIGHTS IF YOU WERE BILLED

The surest way to avoid a surprise charge is a **VIN check with no credit card** at all. If a "free" check has already billed you, federal law gives you leverage.

Five signs a free VIN check is genuinely free

- [ ] It shows the decoded vehicle, or a preview, **without** asking for a card or an account.
- [ ] The upgrade price is printed in plain numbers before checkout, with the words "one-time" or "no subscription".
- [ ] There are no pre-checked boxes at checkout.
- [ ] The site names its data sources, and you can leave at any point owing nothing.

What federal law requires of online subscriptions

The Restore Online Shoppers' Confidence Act covers online sales with a "negative option", meaning your silence is treated as agreement to keep paying. Under 15 U.S.C. § 8403, a seller may only charge you through such a plan if it:

1 · Discloses
all material terms clearly and conspicuously **before** it collects your billing information;

2 · Gets consent
your express informed consent **before** it charges your card or account; and

3 · Lets you stop
by providing **simple mechanisms** to stop recurring charges.

If a free VIN check turned into a charge

1. **Identify the merchant.** Use the phone number or website shown with the charge in your banking app, and search your email for the receipt. Don't guess from a list online.
2. **Cancel with the merchant, and keep proof.** Screenshot the confirmation, keep the email, note the time and the name of anyone you spoke to.
3. **Debit card or bank transfer?** Under Regulation E (12 CFR 1005.10), you can stop a preauthorized electronic transfer by telling your bank, orally or in writing, at least three business days before it's scheduled. The bank may require written confirmation within 14 days of an oral order.
4. **Credit card?** The FTC's guide to the Fair Credit Billing Act says to write to the issuer's billing-inquiries address so your letter arrives within 60 days after the first bill showing the error was sent.
5. **Report it** at ReportFraud.ftc.gov and to your state attorney general, as the FTC suggests.

NO SUBSCRIPTION

CarCheckerVIN's free check needs no card. The full report is a one-time $14.99, so there's nothing to cancel. If you're stuck with another site's plan, CarCheckerVIN's cancellation guide is at **carcheckervin.com/cancel-vin-report-subscription**.

CHAPTER 12

FREE CARFAX REPORT: WHAT'S REAL AND WHAT ISN'T

"**Free Carfax report**" is one of the most hopeful searches in car buying. There are legitimate ways to read a Carfax for nothing, but no way to pull one free for any VIN you like.

Carfax in brief

Carfax, Inc. was founded in 1984 in Virginia and is part of Mobility Global. A single Carfax report is widely quoted at **$44.99**. Its best-known strength is service and maintenance records, and it also offers a license-plate search. Many dealers include a free Carfax with their listings; the dealer pays for it.

Free Carfax routes that work

Route	How it works	Catch
Dealer listings	Many dealers attach a free Carfax to cars they sell; ask for the link if it isn't shown	The seller chose which report to show, and when
AAA membership	Premier members get one free Carfax a year by phone; Classic and Plus members get a discount that varies by club	One a year; you need the membership
Your own car	Carfax's Car Care app tracks maintenance and repairs on cars you own	Not a report on a car you're shopping for
A seller's printout	A private seller shares a report they bought	Check the run date; it ages fast

What doesn't work

"Free Carfax generators"

Sites and posts promising unlimited free Carfax reports, account logins or codes are at best a different product with a familiar name, and at worst a way to collect your details or card. A report you can't trace to its source isn't one to rely on.

Edited or fake reports

A PDF is easy to alter. If a private seller's report decides whether you buy, run your own check on the VIN you read off the car. More: **carcheckervin.com/fake-carfax-report**.

The Carfax Buyback Guarantee, briefly

It pays when a Carfax report missed a DMV-issued title brand. It doesn't cover accidents, has deadlines and caps the payout, so read the current terms. Details: **carcheckervin.com/carfax-buyback-guarantee**.

FREE CARFAX ALTERNATIVE

Start with CarCheckerVIN's free check, which needs no card, then decide: a $14.99 full report, or a 3-pack at $35.99 that costs less than one Carfax. All the free Carfax routes: **carcheckervin.com/how-to-get-a-free-carfax-report** · **/is-carfax-free** · **/aaa-carfax-discount**.

CARFAX VS AUTOCHECK VS FREE VIN CHECKS

Buyers usually end up weighing four options: the two big brand-name reports, a lower-cost report such as CarCheckerVIN's, and the free tools. They aren't substitutes for one another so much as different tools for different stages.

	Carfax	AutoCheck (Experian)	CarCheckerVIN	Free tools
Price	Widely quoted at $44.99	Varies; check Experian's site	Free preview; $14.99; from $9 in packs	$0
Known for	Service and maintenance records	Auction data and the AutoCheck Score	NMVTIS title records, auction sales with photos, liens and impounds	Recalls, open thefts, insurer total losses, one state's title
Consumer NMVTIS report?	No: DOJ says consumers can't get NMVTIS reports from Carfax	No: DOJ says consumers can't get NMVTIS reports from Experian	Includes NMVTIS title records	No
Free route	Dealer listings; AAA Premier	Ask the seller	Free lookup and preview, no card	Always free

AutoCheck prices change and aren't quoted here. Carfax and CarCheckerVIN both also search by license plate; NHTSA's free recall lookup accepts a plate and state.

When a free Carfax is enough

If the dealer's report is recent, the car has lived in one state, the free NHTSA and NICB checks are clean, and an independent mechanic is happy, a free dealer Carfax plus the free tools covers the essentials. Paying for a second report adds little.

When to add your own report

- The dealer's report is old, or you can't confirm it matches the VIN on the car.
- The car has been titled in more than one state.
- The price looks like an auction or salvage price.
- You want auction photos, lien or impound records.
- It's a private sale and no report was offered.

A buyer's sequence that saves money

1. **Free checks on every car:** decode, preview, NHTSA, NICB.
2. **Read any free dealer Carfax** and note its date.
3. **Buy $14.99 reports** on the two or three finalists, or a 3-pack for $35.99.
4. **Add a Carfax** only if its service history would change your decision.
5. **Inspect the winner** before any money changes hands.

COMPARE

Side-by-side comparisons: **carcheckervin.com/autocheck-vs-carfax**, **/alternatives-to-carfax**, **/cheap-carfax** and **/carfax-vin-check**.

CHAPTER 13

WHEN A PAID REPORT IS WORTH IT

Free checks screen. Paid reports decide. The question isn't “free or paid?” but “how much do I still not know about this car, and what would it cost me to find out the hard way?”

Scenario by scenario

Your situation	Free checks	Paid report?
Scrolling dozens of listings	Decode and preview each	Not yet. Shortlist first
Two or three serious candidates	All free checks	**Yes**, on each; a 3-pack is $35.99
Private-party sale	All free checks	**Yes**, before any deposit
Dealer sale with a recent free Carfax	NHTSA and NICB	Optional; add one for auction photos or liens
Car titled in several states, or from a flood area	All free checks	**Yes**: you need every state's brands
Price well below market	All free checks	**Yes**: look for auction sales and total-loss records
Parts car or project you'll never title	Decode, NICB	Often not needed
Selling your own car	Recall check	Useful: a fresh report helps buyers trust you

The pack math

Cars	Singles at $14.99	Pack	Carfax at $44.99
3	$44.97	$35.99	$134.97
5	$74.95	$54.99	$224.95
10	$149.90	$89.99	$449.90

Carfax column uses the widely quoted $44.99 single price. A 3-pack costs less than one Carfax; a 5-pack costs less than two. A pack delivers one report now and keeps the rest as account credits for 12 months, which suits a search that takes a few weekends.

Prices: **carcheckervin.com/pricing**.

Three questions that settle it

Would a brand kill the deal?
If a salvage, flood or rebuilt brand would make you walk away, you need a check that sees every state. That's a paid report.

Does the mileage matter?
If you're paying for low miles, you need the odometer timeline, not just the number on the dash.

Can you get your money back?
In a private sale, usually not easily. The less recourse you have, the more the report is worth.

A report is not an inspection. Not every repair, flood or crash reaches a database. Whatever the report says, have an independent mechanic look at the car before you pay. The Texas DMV gives the same advice.

CHAPTER 14

READING FREE VIN CHECK RESULTS: RED FLAGS & NEXT STEPS

A free VIN check is only useful if you act on what it says. Here is what each kind of finding usually means, and the next move that protects you.

Finding	What it may mean	Next step
VIN on the car differs from the title or ad	A typo at best; a swapped VIN plate at worst	Stop until the paperwork matches the car
Check digit fails on the VIN read from the car	Not a genuine North American VIN	Ask for title and import papers; get a VIN inspection
Decoded year, engine or body differs from the ad	A careless listing, or a misrepresented car	Ask the seller to explain; re-price or walk
Open safety recall	A defect the maker will fix free	Ask for the repair before you buy
NICB: stolen, not recovered	An open theft record on this VIN	Don't buy; contact local police
NICB: total loss	An insurer paid the car out	Expect a brand; see repair records; inspect
State title shows a brand	Salvage, rebuilt, flood or similar history	Price accordingly; check insurance before buying
Preview shows auction records	The car passed through an auction, possibly salvage	Unlock the report to see the sale and photos
Titles in several states in a short time	A pattern TxDMV links to title washing	Get a report that covers every state
An insurance company listed as an owner	Usually a total loss the insurer took over	Find out why before going further

Why “clean” doesn’t always mean clean

False negatives happen. The Justice Department warns that an NMVTIS search can come back showing no junk or salvage history when that's wrong, and that NMVTIS doesn't hold everything a state keeps on file.

Coverage has edges. NICB sees participating insurers. NHTSA's recall lookup covers a 15-year window. A state search sees one state.

Not everything is reported. A crash paid in cash, a flood on an uninsured car, a repair done in a driveway: none of these has to reach a database.

So: treat a clean result as permission to keep going, not as a verdict. The inspection is still the final check.

NEXT STEP

If a free check raises a question, the $14.99 CarCheckerVIN report shows the details: brand states and dates, odometer readings, liens, impounds and auction photos. Start at **carcheckervin.com/free-vin-check**.

CHAPTER 15

PLATES, MOTORCYCLES, BOATS, CLASSICS & PRIVACY

Most free VIN check advice assumes a modern car with a VIN in plain sight. Here's how the free tools stretch, and where they stop, for everything else.

Free VIN check by license plate

When an ad shows the plate but not the VIN, a plate search finds the VIN first. CarCheckerVIN searches U.S. plates, and NHTSA's recall lookup accepts a plate and state as well as a VIN. Then read the VIN off the car before you buy: plates move between vehicles; VINs don't. **carcheckervin.com/license-plate-lookup**

Motorcycles

On-road motorcycles use the same 17-character VIN, usually stamped on the steering head. NICB VINCheck covers some motorcycles, and the NHTSA decoder reads motorcycle VINs. Free checks and a report work the same way: **carcheckervin.com/motorcycle-vin-lookup**.

Boats

Boats carry a 12-character Hull Identification Number under U.S. Coast Guard rules (33 CFR Part 181), not a VIN. NICB covers some watercraft, and Ohio's free title search has a HIN tab for Ohio-titled boats. More: **carcheckervin.com/hin-lookup**.

Classic cars (before 1981)

The 17-character standard starts with model year 1981. Older serial numbers vary by maker, and NHTSA's decoder rejects pre-1981 decode attempts. Use make-specific references, the title and the body tag: **carcheckervin.com/classic-car-vin-decoder**.

Dealers and bulk checks

Paste a list of VINs on carcheckervin.com to decode and preview several cars at once, or use **carcheckervin.com/bulk-vin-check**. For inventory volume, CarCheckerVIN offers wholesale pricing, bulk API access and white-label reports at **carcheckervin.com/dealers**.

Privacy: no owner names

The Driver's Privacy Protection Act of 1994 (18 U.S.C. § 2721 et seq.) limits release of personal information from state motor vehicle records to permitted uses. A VIN or plate search doesn't reveal the owner to the public, so treat any “free VIN check with owner name” offer with suspicion.

Electric and hybrid cars

EVs and hybrids use the same 17-character VIN, and every free check in this guide works on them. NHTSA's decoder reports the electrification level, such as “BEV (Battery Electric Vehicle)”, in place of engine size. What no VIN check shows is battery health; ask the seller or a dealer of the brand for a battery report, and run the recall lookup, since high-voltage components can be recalled like any other part.

Imports and gray-market cars

Vehicles built for other markets may not follow the North American check-digit rule, so a failed check digit on a legally imported car isn't proof of fraud on its own. Ask for the import paperwork, and make sure the title, the VIN on the car and the import documents all agree.

REFERENCE

FREE VIN CHECK GLOSSARY

Approved NMVTIS data provider
A company the Justice Department lists as authorized to sell NMVTIS reports to the public.

Auction record
A sale of the vehicle through a wholesale or salvage auction, sometimes with photos.

Brand (title brand)
A word a state prints on a title to flag history such as salvage, rebuilt, flood or junk.

Check digit
VIN position 9 on North American vehicles, calculated from the other 16 characters to catch errors.

Decoder
A tool that translates a VIN into year, make, model, engine and plant.

Free preview
A no-cost summary of a VIN (specs and a few record counts) before you pay for details.

Free trial
An offer that becomes a paid plan unless you cancel in time; usually needs a card.

Impound record
A record that the vehicle was towed and held, for example by police or a towing yard.

Lemon buyback
A vehicle repurchased by its maker under a state lemon law; some states brand the title.

Lien
A lender's legal claim on a vehicle until a loan is repaid.

Negative option
A sales term where silence or inaction counts as agreement to keep paying.

NHTSA
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: runs the vPIC decoder and the recall lookup.

NICB
National Insurance Crime Bureau: runs the free VINCheck lookup.

NMVTIS
National Motor Vehicle Title Information System, run by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Odometer rollback
Illegally lowering the recorded mileage; exposed by a reading timeline.

Open recall
A safety recall that applies to a vehicle and hasn't been repaired yet.

Plate lookup
A search that finds a vehicle's VIN from its license plate and state.

Rebuilt title
A former salvage vehicle repaired and approved for the road; the brand normally stays.

ROSCA
Restore Online Shoppers' Confidence Act; 15 U.S.C. § 8403 sets rules for online subscriptions.

Salvage title
A brand for a vehicle treated as a loss after serious damage; rules vary by state.

Stolen, not recovered
An open theft record; what NICB VINCheck reports.

Title washing
Re-titling a branded vehicle through other states until the brand disappears.

Total loss
An insurer's decision that repair isn't worth it; the insurer pays out the value.

Vehicle history report
A dated record of titles, odometer readings, owners, liens, auctions and service.

VIN
Vehicle Identification Number: 17 characters, model year 1981 onward; no I, O or Q.

vPIC
NHTSA's Product Information Catalog: the official decoding database and API.

ANSWERS

FREE VIN CHECK FAQ

Is a free VIN check really free?

NHTSA's decoder and recall lookup, NICB VINCheck and some state title searches are. CarCheckerVIN's lookup and preview need no card. Be wary of a “free” check that wants a card.

How do I check a VIN number for free?

Read the VIN off the car, decode it, run NHTSA's recall lookup and NICB VINCheck, then the free preview at carcheckervin.com/free-vin-check (Chapter 2).

What is the best free VIN check?

A combination: CarCheckerVIN's free check for identity plus damage, auction and recall counts, NHTSA for recalls, NICB for open thefts and insurer total losses, plus your state's title search if it has one.

Can I get a free vehicle history report?

Not a complete one on demand. Dealer-provided reports are free to read, AAA Premier includes one Carfax a year, and CarCheckerVIN gives one free for referrals.

How do I get a free Carfax report?

From a dealer listing, through AAA Premier, or from a seller who already bought one. A site promising a free Carfax for any VIN you like isn't offering a genuine Carfax.

Is there a VIN check with no credit card?

Yes. NHTSA, NICB and CarCheckerVIN's free lookup and preview all work without a card.

Is NICB VINCheck free?

Yes, with 5 searches per 24 hours per IP address. It shows stolen-not-recovered and insurer total-loss records from participating insurers.

How do I do a free recall check by VIN?

Enter the VIN, or plate and state, at nhtsa.gov/recalls. Repairs are free at franchised dealers.

Does a free VIN check show accidents?

No free government tool lists crashes. NICB shows insurer total losses only. An inspection is the best check for repaired damage.

Why did a “free” VIN check charge my card?

Usually a small payment started a recurring plan. Cancel, keep proof, and use your dispute rights (Chapter 11b).

Is a free VIN lookup the same as a VIN check?

No. A lookup decodes what the car is; a check screens for problems. Both are free at carcheckervin.com.

Can a free VIN check show the owner’s name?

No. Federal privacy law (the DPPA) restricts owner information from state records.

How many free NICB searches do I get?

Five per 24 hours from one IP address.

Are free VIN check sites safe?

Government sites are. Elsewhere, look for results before a card, named sources and a one-time price.

How much is a full report after a free check?

$14.99 at CarCheckerVIN, one-time, or from $9 each in packs. Carfax is widely quoted at $44.99.

Can I check a VIN free by license plate?

Yes: CarCheckerVIN searches U.S. plates, and NHTSA's recall lookup takes a plate.

Does a clean free check mean the car is fine?

No. Free tools cover recalls, open thefts, insurer total losses and one state's title. Add a full report and an inspection.

Can I do a free title check?

In some states: Ohio, Florida and New York offer free lookups of their own records. Brands from every state need NMVTIS data, which is paid.

FREE VIN CHECK

Check any VIN free. No card needed.

The decoded vehicle and a free preview of its history records, by VIN or U.S. plate. The full report is a one-time $14.99.

carcheckervin.com/free-vin-check →

Scan to check a VIN free

Sources

- 49 CFR Part 565, VIN requirements; § 565.16 reporting (law.cornell.edu)
- NHTSA vPIC decoder and API (vpic.nhtsa.dot.gov); VINs decoded Nov 2026
- NHTSA recall lookup (nhtsa.gov/recalls); odometer fraud estimate (nhtsa.gov)
- NICB VINCheck (nicb.org/vincheck)
- U.S. DOJ / BJA, NMVTIS consumer pages and providers (vehiclehistory.bja.ojp.gov)
- Ohio BMV Online Services, Title Search (bmvonline.dps.ohio.gov)
- FLHSMV Vehicle Information Check (services.flhsmv.gov)
- New York DMV, Check a Title or Lien Status (dmv.ny.gov)
- TxDMV, Title Check – Look before you buy; Smart Buyer: Flood Damage (txdmv.gov)
- 15 U.S.C. § 8403 (ROSCA); 12 CFR 1005.10 (law.cornell.edu)
- FTC: free trials and auto-renewals; disputing credit card charges (consumer.ftc.gov)
- 49 U.S.C. Chapter 327; 18 U.S.C. § 2721; 33 CFR Part 181
- Carfax price: independent pricing listings, 2026
- CarCheckerVIN prices: carcheckervin.com/pricing, Nov 2026

How we made this guide: written by CarCheckerVIN with AI assistance, from the public sources listed above; figures, prices and links checked November 2026.

More free tools at carcheckervin.com

VIN decoder
Recall check
NICB VIN check
License plate lookup
Car title check
NMVTIS VIN check
Window sticker by VIN
AutoCheck vs Carfax
Vehicle history report

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