VIN LOOKUP SEARCH

The complete 2026 guide to **VIN lookup**, **VIN search** and **VIN check**: decode any VIN, compare **Carfax** and AutoCheck, get a free Carfax report, and know where to buy a vehicle history report.

17	$14.99	29
characters in every modern VIN	full VIN report at carcheckervin.com	pages of guides, tables & checklists

CarCheckerVIN

www.carcheckervin.com

Free VIN lookup & decoder · Vehicle history reports

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ABOUT THIS VIN LOOKUP GUIDE

Every car, truck, SUV, motorcycle and trailer sold in the United States since the 1981 model year carries a unique 17-character **vehicle identification number (VIN)**. Typing that number into a **VIN lookup** or **VIN search** tool is the fastest way to confirm what a vehicle really is, and the first step in finding out where it has been.

This guide is published by **CarCheckerVIN (carcheckervin.com)**, a free VIN decoder and vehicle history report service. It explains, in plain language, where to buy a VIN report, how VINs are built, how to read each character, where to find the number on any vehicle, which free government tools to use, what a Carfax report includes and how it compares with AutoCheck and cheaper reports, and how to spot VIN fraud. Every rule quoted here comes from the federal VIN regulation (49 CFR Part 565), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the National Insurance Crime Bureau (NICB) or the U.S. Department of Justice's NMVTIS program; sources are listed on page 29.

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FREE VIN LOOKUP

Run a free VIN lookup while you read

Enter any 17-character VIN at **carcheckervin.com/vin-lookup** to decode the year, make, model, engine and factory specs and see a free preview of the vehicle's history, with no credit card. A full vehicle history report costs $14.99 per VIN. No VIN handy? Search by U.S. license plate at **carcheckervin.com/license-plate-lookup**.

BUYER'S SHORTCUT

WHERE TO BUY A VIN REPORT

Free tools decode a VIN, but a full **vehicle history report**, the paid **VIN check** that joins titles, mileage, owners, liens and auctions into one timeline, has to be bought. Here is where.

OUR PICK

CarCheckerVIN · www.carcheckervin.com

- **Free VIN lookup and preview** for any 17-character VIN, with no credit card
- **Full VIN report: $14.99** per vehicle, with no subscription
- **Packs for shoppers:** 3 reports for $35.99 ($12 each), 5 for $54.99 ($11 each), 10 for $89.99 ($9 each)
- Search **by VIN or by U.S. license plate**, or paste a list of VINs
- Title brands, odometer readings, owner count and NMVTIS title records
- Liens and impounds, insurance total-loss records, auction sales with photos
- Service records, open recalls, usage type, factory specs and market value
- Ready in under a minute, print-ready, about a third of a Carfax report's price

Start a free VIN lookup at carcheckervin.com/vin-lookup → · See all prices

Where to buy a vehicle history report: the main options

Where to buy	Price for one report	Good to know
CarCheckerVIN carcheckervin.com	**$14.99** packs from $9 a report	Free preview first; NMVTIS title data, auction photos, liens, odometer, owners. No subscription.
Carfax	$44.99 widely quoted single price	The best-known brand, strongest on service records. Many dealers include a Carfax for free (Chapter 9).
AutoCheck (Experian)	Paid; multi-report packs	Known for auction data and the AutoCheck Score. Often included on dealer and auction listings.
NMVTIS approved providers	Low cost	Federal title, brand and odometer core; listed at vehiclehistory.bja.ojp.gov.

How to choose where to buy a VIN report

- ☐ **NMVTIS title data included:** the federal check against title washing
- ☐ **A free preview**, so you can confirm the VIN and model before paying
- ☐ **Pay per report**, or a pack if you're comparing several cars
- ☐ **No surprise subscription:** avoid trials that renew monthly
- ☐ **A sample report** you can read before you buy
- ☐ **Clear contact details** and a real company behind the site

Buying for several cars? Screen each one with the free preview and buy reports only for your shortlist; a 5-pack costs less than one Carfax. Dealers get volume pricing at **carcheckervin.com/dealers**, and anyone can earn a free report by inviting friends at **carcheckervin.com/refer**.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS A VIN LOOKUP?

A **VIN lookup** is any search that starts with a vehicle identification number and returns information about that exact vehicle. Because no two vehicles share a VIN within a 30-year span, the number works like a fingerprint for the car's specs, title, recalls and history.

Five names for one search

People use several phrases for the same idea. The differences matter, because each kind of search answers a different question:

Search	What it answers	Typical result
VIN lookup / VIN search	"What is this vehicle, and what is on record about it?"	Decoded specs plus a summary of title, mileage and recall records
VIN decoder	"What do these 17 characters mean?"	Year, make, model, trim, body, engine, transmission, plant
VIN check	"Is anything wrong with this vehicle's past?"	Title brands, salvage or total-loss records, odometer readings
Vehicle history report	"What happened to this car, in order?"	A dated timeline of titles, owners, sales, auctions, service, liens
Recall lookup	"Does this car have an unrepaired safety recall?"	Open recalls the manufacturer has not fixed for this VIN

What a VIN lookup can tell you

From the VIN itself (free)

- Country of manufacture and manufacturer
- Model year, make, model and often trim
- Body style, engine size and fuel type
- Restraint systems and vehicle type
- Assembly plant and production sequence
- Whether the VIN is valid (check digit)

From records linked to the VIN

- Title history and state title brands
- Salvage, junk and insurance total-loss records
- Odometer readings over time
- Open safety recalls
- Liens, impounds and auction sales
- Number of owners and service visits

Why a VIN search beats a seller's word

A seller can describe a car any way they like; the VIN can't be talked into a cleaner title. Before you pay a deposit, run a **VIN search** and compare the decoded year, model, trim and engine with the ad.

Who uses VIN lookups

Buyers check history before they buy, **sellers** show a clean report, **owners** look up recalls and parts, and **dealers** screen trade-ins in bulk. CarCheckerVIN's tools at **carcheckervin.com/vin-check** serve all of them, including a multi-VIN box.

CHAPTER 2

THE VIN: RULES AND HISTORY

Before 1981, every automaker numbered its vehicles its own way: VINs ran from 5 to 13 characters, and two makers could use the same number. The modern system fixed that.

The 1981 standard

NHTSA's VIN rule, codified at **49 CFR Part 565**, requires a 17-character VIN on every passenger car, multipurpose passenger vehicle, truck, bus, trailer, motorcycle and low-speed vehicle made for the U.S. market, starting with the **1981 model year**. The same 17-character layout is used internationally under the ISO 3779 standard, which is why a VIN lookup works on most imported vehicles too.

The character rules

- Exactly **17 characters**, no spaces or dashes.
- Digits **0–9** and capital letters **A–Z**.
- The letters **I, O and Q are never used**, so they can't be confused with 1 and 0.
- The 10th character (model year) is never **U, Z or 0**.
- In North America, the 9th character is a **calculated check digit** (0–9 or X).

Quick test

If a "VIN" has 16 or 18 characters, contains an I, O or Q, or fails the check-digit math on page 9, it is either mistyped or not a genuine modern VIN. Fix the typo before you run a **VIN number lookup**, or the search will find nothing, or the wrong car.

Who assigns the codes

The first three characters, the **World Manufacturer Identifier (WMI)**, are issued to manufacturers. In the United States, SAE International assigns WMIs on NHTSA's behalf. The manufacturer then decides how to encode characters 4 through 8 and the plant code, and must submit that decoding information to NHTSA, which publishes it in the free vPIC (Product Information Catalog and Vehicle Listing) database behind NHTSA's VIN decoder. That is why a government decoder can turn a VIN into a model and engine without access to any private database.

Where the VIN must appear

For passenger cars, MPVs and trucks of 10,000 lb GVWR or less, the VIN must be readable through the windshield on the driver's side, and it appears on the certification label on the door jamb. The federal theft-prevention standard (49 CFR Part 541) also requires the VIN on major parts of many high-theft car lines, such as the engine, transmission, doors and fenders.

Pre-1981 vehicles

A classic car built before 1981 has a shorter, manufacturer-specific number that 17-character decoders can't read; it needs a make-specific chart. Chapter 14 covers classics, boats and other special cases.

A VIN is not secret

The VIN is visible through every windshield and printed on public listings. A VIN alone does not reveal the owner's name or address; federal privacy law protects that information (see Chapter 13). Sharing a VIN with a buyer so they can run a **VIN check** is normal and safe.

CHAPTER 3

ANATOMY OF A 17-CHARACTER VIN

Every modern VIN has the same three sections: who built the vehicle, what it is, and which individual vehicle it is. Here is a real example, decoded with NHTSA's free vPIC decoder.



Position	Name	In the example	What it means
1	Country / region	`1`	Built in the United States (1, 4 and 5 are U.S. codes)
2–3	Manufacturer & type	`HG`	With position 1, "1HG" = American Honda, passenger car
4–8	Vehicle descriptor (VDS)	`CM826`	Honda's code for an Accord EX-V6 coupe, 2 doors, 3.0-liter V6, automatic
9	Check digit	`3`	Calculated from the other 16 characters; NHTSA reports it correct
10	Model year	`3`	2003 (see the year table on page 8)
11	Assembly plant	`A`	Marysville, Ohio
12–17	Production sequence	`004352`	This individual car's serial number at the plant

The WMI (positions 1–3)

Identifies the maker and, often, the vehicle type. Large manufacturers hold many WMIs: one per country, brand or vehicle type. Small makers that build fewer than 1,000 vehicles a year use a **9** in position 3, and positions 12–14 then complete their identifier.

The VDS (positions 4–8)

Each manufacturer chooses its own code for model line, series, body type, engine and restraint system. That is why a decoder needs the maker's published decoding data, not a universal formula.

The VIS (positions 10–17)

The vehicle identifier section starts with the model year and plant codes. The last six characters are the production sequence number; together with everything before them, they make the VIN unique.

TRY IT

Paste any VIN into the free decoder at **carcheckervin.com/vin-decoder** to see each section decoded for your own car.

WORLD MANUFACTURER IDENTIFIERS

The first character of a VIN is a country code, and it usually tells you where the vehicle was built rather than where the brand is from: a Honda starting with 1 or 5 was usually assembled in the United States, one starting with J in Japan. The plant code in position 11 is the final word.

First character: country code

1st char	Country / region
1, 4, 5	United States
2	Canada
3	Mexico
7	New Zealand; newer U.S. series such as 7SA
9	Brazil and other South American countries
J	Japan
K	South Korea
L	China
M	India, Thailand and other Asian countries
S	United Kingdom
V	France, Spain and nearby countries
W	Germany
Y	Sweden, Finland
Z	Italy

Letters A–H are assigned to Africa, J–R to Asia, S–Z to Europe, and 1–9 to North America, Oceania and South America. Exact country ranges within each region are set by the ISO/SAE allocation tables.

Common WMIs on U.S. roads

WMI	Manufacturer / type
1G1	Chevrolet passenger car (USA)
1FA	Ford passenger car (USA)
1FT	Ford truck (USA)
1HG	Honda passenger car (USA)
JHM	Honda (Japan)
4T1	Toyota passenger car (USA)
JT2 / JTD	Toyota (Japan)
1N4	Nissan passenger car (USA)
1C4	Chrysler / Jeep / Dodge MPV (USA)
5YJ	Tesla (USA)
KMH	Hyundai (Korea)
KNA	Kia (Korea)
JF1	Subaru (Japan)
WBA	BMW passenger car (Germany)
WDD	Mercedes-Benz passenger car (Germany)
WVW	Volkswagen passenger car (Germany)
3VW	Volkswagen (Mexico)
YV1	Volvo passenger car (Sweden)
SAL	Land Rover (UK)

Why the country code matters to a buyer

Compare the country code with the decoded **plant code** in position 11 and the door-jamb label. They usually agree, but not always: NHTSA decodes some German-coded BMW and Mercedes-Benz sedans (WBA, WDD) as built in South Africa. If an ad says “Japanese-built” and the plant decodes to Kentucky, the claim is wrong, and a seller who gets that wrong may get other things wrong too.

MODEL YEAR, PLANT & SERIAL NUMBER

The 10th character is the model year. The code repeats every 30 years, so the same letter can mean 1985 or 2015. The 7th character tells you which cycle applies.

Model-year codes (position 10)

Code	1980–2009 cycle	2010–2039 cycle	Code	1980–2009 cycle	2010–2039 cycle
A	1980	2010	T	1996	2026
B	1981	2011	V	1997	2027
C	1982	2012	W	1998	2028
D	1983	2013	X	1999	2029
E	1984	2014	Y	2000	2030
F	1985	2015	1	2001	2031
G	1986	2016	2	2002	2032
H	1987	2017	3	2003	2033
J	1988	2018	4	2004	2034
K	1989	2019	5	2005	2035
L	1990	2020	6	2006	2036
M	1991	2021	7	2007	2037
N	1992	2022	8	2008	2038
P	1993	2023	9	2009	2039
R	1994	2024			
S	1995	2025			

The 7th-character rule

For passenger cars, multipurpose vehicles and trucks with a GVWR of 10,000 lb or less, the VIN rule uses position 7 to separate the two cycles: if the 7th character is a **number**, the year code belongs to **1980–2009**; if it is a **letter**, it belongs to **2010–2039**. A “D” in position 10 is therefore 1983 when position 7 is a digit and 2013 when position 7 is a letter.

Model year is not build date

A 2027 model can be built in early 2026. The exact month and year of manufacture are printed on the door-jamb certification label, not encoded in the VIN.

Position 11: the plant

Each manufacturer assigns its own plant letters or digits. “A” means Marysville, Ohio on our Honda example, but the same letter means a different factory for Ford or Toyota. A VIN decoder translates it using the maker's published list.

Positions 12–17: the serial

The production sequence number is assigned as vehicles come down the line. It makes the VIN unique, and some makers use it to identify mid-year production changes, which is why parts catalogs sometimes ask for the full VIN rather than just the model year.

CHAPTER 4

THE CHECK DIGIT, EXPLAINED

The 9th character of every North American VIN is a check digit: a number calculated from the other 16 characters. It exists to catch typos and crude forgeries. If one character is copied wrong, the math almost always stops working.

Step 1: turn letters into numbers

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	J	K	L	M	N	P	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	1	2	3	4	5	7	9	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Digits keep their own value. I, O and Q have no value because they are never used.

Step 2: multiply each position by its weight

Position	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
VIN	1	H	G	C	M	8	2	6	3	3	A	0	0	4	3	5	2
Value	1	8	7	3	4	8	2	6	–	3	1	0	0	4	3	5	2
Weight	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	10	0	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2
Product	8	56	42	15	16	24	4	60	0	27	8	0	0	20	12	15	4

Step 3: add, divide by 11, keep the remainder

Add the products: 8 + 56 + 42 + 15 + 16 + 24 + 4 + 60 + 0 + 27 + 8 + 0 + 0 + 20 + 12 + 15 + 4 = **311**.

Divide by 11: 311 ÷ 11 = 28, remainder **3**. The remainder is the check digit, and position 9 of our VIN is indeed **3**, so the VIN is valid. When the remainder is 10, the check digit is the letter **X**.

Notice position 9 carries a weight of 0: the check digit never counts toward itself.

What the check digit can and can't prove

- **Can:** catch nearly every single-character typo, such as a 5 typed as an S, or 8 as B.
- **Can:** expose a VIN invented at random, which fails about 10 times in 11.
- **Can't:** prove the VIN belongs to the car in front of you. A cloned VIN copied from a real car passes the math perfectly (see Chapter 16).
- **Note:** many European-market VINs don't use a check digit, so an imported grey-market car can fail it without being fake.

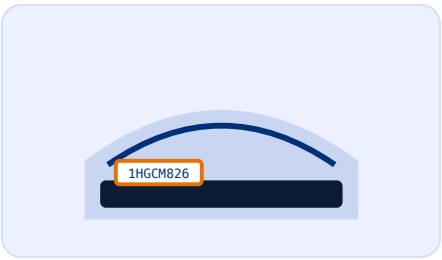
AUTOMATIC

You never have to do this by hand. Every VIN lookup on **carcheckervin.com** validates the check digit first and flags a VIN that doesn't add up, so you can fix a typo before you pay for anything.

CHAPTER 5

WHERE TO FIND THE VIN

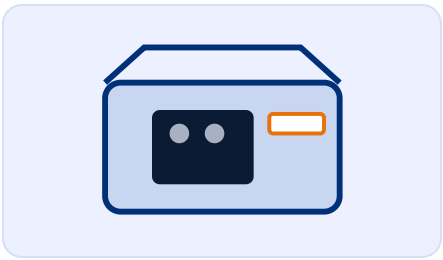
You can find a vehicle's VIN in at least nine places. Check two or three of them on any car you plan to buy: they must all match.



Dashboard, driver's side
Look through the windshield at the lower corner on the driver's side.



Driver's door jamb
On the certification label at the door pillar, with the build month and year.



Engine bay / firewall
Stamped on the firewall or engine block on many vehicles; also on some strut towers.



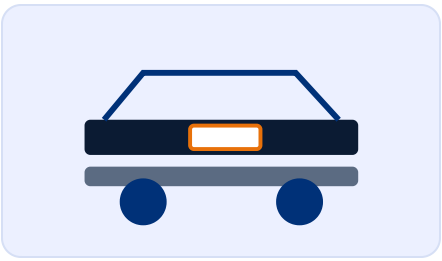
Certificate of title
Printed near the top of every state title, next to year, make and model.



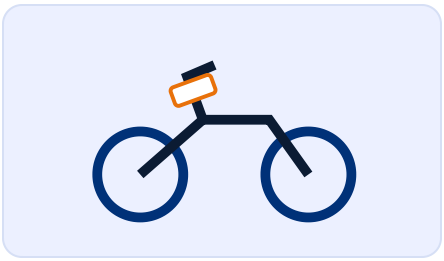
Registration card
Your state registration lists the full VIN; keep a copy in the glovebox.



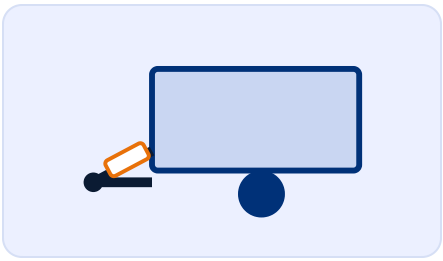
Insurance card & policy
Auto insurers list the VIN of each covered vehicle on your ID card.



Frame rail (trucks)
Pickups and body-on-frame SUVs often carry the VIN on the frame, near the front wheel.



Motorcycle steering neck
Stamped on the frame at the steering head; also on a label and the engine case.



Trailer tongue
On a plate or sticker on the tongue or front frame rail of most trailers.

CarCheckerVIN keeps an illustrated, model-by-model version of this list at **carcheckervin.com/where-is-the-vin-number-on-a-car**.

READING A VIN WITHOUT MISTAKES

Most failed VIN searches aren't caused by a missing record. They're caused by one character copied wrong. A few habits make every **VIN number search** come back right the first time.

Characters people confuse

You see	It is almost certainly	Why
O (letter)	`0 (zero)`	The letter O is never used in a VIN
I or l (letters)	`1 (one)`	The letter I is never used
Q	`0 (zero)`	The letter Q is never used
S vs 5, B vs 8, Z vs 2	Check the check digit	All are legal, so only the math or a second VIN location settles it
U, Z or 0 in position 10	A typo	Those characters are never model-year codes

Five habits for an accurate VIN search

1. **Photograph, don't transcribe.** Take a sharp photo of the dashboard plate or door label and copy the VIN from the picture. Glare on the windshield hides characters; shade the glass with your hand.
2. **Count to 17.** Split the VIN into groups of 3-5-1-8 (WMI, VDS, check digit, VIS) as you type it. A missing character becomes obvious.
3. **Use two locations.** Read the VIN from the dashboard *and* the door jamb, and compare both with the title. They must match character for character.
4. **Copy from the listing carefully.** Online ads sometimes truncate or mistype the VIN. If the decoded model doesn't match the ad, ask the seller for a photo of the door label.
5. **Let the tool validate it.** A good VIN lookup tool checks length, banned letters and the check digit before searching, and tells you which part looks wrong.

When the VINs don't match

If the dashboard VIN, door-jamb VIN and title VIN are not identical, **stop the purchase**. Possible explanations range from a replaced door after a crash (the door label belongs to another car) to a stolen vehicle carrying a cloned VIN plate. Ask for repair paperwork, have a mechanic or your state's VIN inspection station look at the car, and don't hand over money until the numbers line up. Many states require a formal **VIN verification** by a police officer, DMV inspector or licensed verifier before they'll title a car brought in from out of state.

Signs a VIN plate has been tampered with

- Scratches, glue, tool marks or non-factory rivets around the dashboard VIN plate
- A door-jamb label that is missing, freshly applied, crooked or printed on the wrong paper
- A VIN that passes the check digit but decodes to a different model or engine than the car

CHAPTER 6

HOW TO DO A VIN LOOKUP, STEP BY STEP

A complete **VIN lookup** takes about ten minutes and costs nothing until you decide a vehicle is worth a full report. Here is the order that saves the most time and money.

1. **Get the full 17-character VIN.** Ask the seller for it, copy it from the listing, or photograph the dashboard plate. A seller who refuses to share the VIN is a red flag in itself.
2. **Decode it.** Run the VIN through a free decoder such as **carcheckervin.com/vin-decoder** or NHTSA's vPIC decoder. Confirm the year, make, model, trim, body style and engine match the advertisement exactly.
3. **Check for open recalls.** Enter the VIN at nhtsa.gov/recalls or **carcheckervin.com/recall-check**. Unrepaired recalls are fixed free by dealers, but you want to know before you drive it home.
4. **Run the free theft and total-loss check.** NICB's VINCheck shows whether participating insurers reported the vehicle stolen and not recovered, or declared it a salvage or flood total loss.
5. **Buy a vehicle history report on your finalist.** Once a car passes the free checks, a full report fills in title brands, odometer readings, owners, liens, auctions and service. At CarCheckerVIN you see a free preview first, then unlock the full report for $14.99.
6. **Match the report to the car.** Compare the last recorded odometer reading with the dashboard, the title state with the seller's story, and any lien with the paperwork.
7. **Get a pre-purchase inspection.** A VIN search tells you about the paper trail; a mechanic tells you about the metal. You need both.

VIN search by license plate

No VIN? A **license plate lookup** is the next best way to find a vehicle. A plate search matches the state and plate number to a VIN through registration data, then runs the same VIN lookup. It is handy when you are standing in a parking lot or reading a listing photo that shows the plate but not the VIN.

BY PLATE

Enter a U.S. plate and state at **carcheckervin.com/license-plate-lookup** to find the VIN and decoded specs. Plates move between cars, so always confirm the result against the VIN on the vehicle.

Checking several cars at once

Shopping between three or four cars? Paste a list of VINs into the multi-VIN box on the **carcheckervin.com** homepage to decode and preview them together, then buy reports only for the cars still in the running. Dealers and fleet buyers use the same approach to screen auction lists.

CHAPTER 7

FREE VIN LOOKUP TOOLS

Several excellent **free VIN lookup** tools exist, most of them run by the government or by the insurance industry. Each covers one slice of a vehicle's story. Use them together.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

NHTSA VIN Decoder (vPIC)

The official decoder at **vpic.nhtsa.dot.gov/decoder** turns a VIN into the specifications manufacturers report to NHTSA: model year, make, model, body class, engine, safety equipment and the build plant and country. It also tells you whether the check digit is correct. It does not show history: no titles, owners, accidents or mileage. Its data comes straight from the manufacturer, so it is the best tie-breaker when a seller and a listing disagree about specs.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

NHTSA Recall Lookup

At **nhtsa.gov/recalls** you can search by VIN or license plate for unrepaired safety recalls on vehicles from major manufacturers. NHTSA notes its limits: it doesn't show recalls more than 15 years old (unless the maker offers more coverage), recalls from some small or ultra-luxury makers, or very recent recalls whose VINs haven't been loaded yet.

NATIONAL INSURANCE CRIME BUREAU

NICB VINCheck

VINCheck at **nicb.org/vincheck** checks a VIN against theft and total-loss records from participating insurers, which NICB says represent **92.49% of earned U.S. insurance premium**. It shows whether a vehicle was reported stolen and not recovered, or declared a salvage or flood loss. It is limited to **five searches per 24 hours per IP address**, and NICB itself warns that it is not a full history report.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

NMVTIS (National Motor Vehicle Title Information System)

NMVTIS links state titling agencies, insurers and junk and salvage yards so that a title brand can't simply disappear when a car crosses a state line. The public can't search NMVTIS directly; instead, the Justice Department approves **NMVTIS data providers** that sell low-cost reports, listed at **vehiclehistory.bja.ojp.gov**. An NMVTIS report shows the current title state and brand, brand history, the last odometer reading recorded at titling, and total-loss, junk and salvage records.

CARCHECKERVIN.COM

CarCheckerVIN free VIN lookup & preview

CarCheckerVIN combines a free decoder with a free preview of what the full report contains for that VIN, with no card required. Start at **carcheckervin.com/vin-lookup**, or use the topic tools: **NMVTIS VIN check**, **salvage title check**, **odometer check** and **lien check**.

FREE VS. PAID: WHAT EACH VIN CHECK SHOWS

"Can I do a VIN check for free?" Yes, partly. Free tools answer important yes-or-no questions. A paid history report connects the records into a timeline. This table shows who covers what.

Information	NHTSA decoder	NHTSA recalls	NICB VINCheck	NMVTIS report	Full history report
Year, make, model, engine	✓	✓	–	✓	✓
Check-digit validation	✓	–	–	–	✓
Open safety recalls	–	✓	–	–	✓
Stolen & not recovered (insurer reports)	–	–	✓	–	varies
Insurance total loss / salvage	–	–	✓	✓	✓
Current title brand & brand history	–	–	–	✓	✓
Odometer readings over time	–	–	–	last at titling	✓
Number of owners, title states	–	–	–	partial	✓
Liens and impounds	–	–	–	–	✓
Auction sales & photos	–	–	–	–	✓
Service & maintenance records	–	–	–	–	when reported
Market value estimate	–	–	–	–	✓
Price	Free	Free	Free, 5/day	Low cost	$14.99 at CarCheckerVIN

"Full history report" reflects the sections in a CarCheckerVIN report; other paid providers differ. Coverage of any record type depends on what was reported for that VIN.

Carfax, AutoCheck and other paid reports

Carfax and AutoCheck are the best-known paid **vehicle history reports**. Chapter 9 explains what a Carfax report includes, compares Carfax vs AutoCheck vs CarCheckerVIN, and lists every legitimate way to get a **free Carfax report**. If a listing doesn't include one, an independent report such as CarCheckerVIN's costs a fraction of the price.

How to read a "clean" free result

> "No records found" on a free check means no participating source reported a problem. It is not a guarantee. NICB's own terms say a vehicle could be stolen or seriously damaged without its records appearing. Treat a clean free check as permission to keep researching, not as a final answer.

CHAPTER 8

INSIDE A VEHICLE HISTORY REPORT

A **vehicle history report** is a VIN lookup that keeps going: it collects every record tied to the VIN and arranges them by date, so you can see what happened to the car between the factory and the seller's driveway.

Title records & brands

Each time a state issues a title, the record shows the state, date and any brand such as salvage, rebuilt, flood, junk or lemon buyback. Gaps or rapid state-to-state retitling deserve a closer look.

Odometer readings

Readings come from title transfers, inspections, auctions and service visits. They should rise steadily. A later reading lower than an earlier one is the classic sign of a rollback.

Ownership history

The number of owners and how long each kept the car. Many short ownerships can point to a problem car that keeps getting sold on.

Insurance & total-loss records

When an insurer pays out a vehicle as a total loss, that record follows the VIN even if the car is rebuilt and retitled.

Liens & impounds

A lien means a lender still has a claim on the car. Buy a car with an unpaid lien and you may not get a clear title. Impound records show tows and storage.

Auction history & photos

Salvage and dealer auction listings often include photos taken at the time of sale, sometimes showing damage that has since been repaired.

Service records & recalls

Reported maintenance visits and open recalls help you judge how the car was cared for and what still needs doing.

Specs & market value

Factory equipment, original MSRP and an estimate of current value help you decide whether the asking price is fair.

CARCHECKERVIN REPORT

What's in a CarCheckerVIN vehicle history report

Each report covers title records and state title brands (salvage, junk, rebuilt, flood, lemon buyback), odometer readings, owner count, insurance and total-loss records, lien history and impound information, auction sales with photos, service records, open recalls, usage type (personal, fleet, rental and more), factory specs and a market value estimate. It draws on NMVTIS title data and other sources and is ready in under a minute.

Free preview, no card · $14.99 per full report · Print-ready report · carcheckervin.com/vehicle-history-report

Reading the report like a pro

1. **Start with the title section.** Any brand changes the car's value and, in some states, its insurability.
2. **Line up the odometer readings.** Divide miles by years: about 12,000–15,000 a year is typical; far less needs explaining.
3. **Map the locations.** A car titled in a hurricane-hit area right after a storm deserves a flood inspection.
4. **Look for gaps.** Long silences can mean the car sat unused, or that something happened off the record.
5. **Check the lien status** and make sure the seller can deliver a clear title at the sale.

CHAPTER 9

CARFAX VIN LOOKUP & CARFAX REPORTS

Carfax is the best-known name in vehicle history: “run the Carfax” has become shorthand for checking any used car. Here is what a **Carfax VIN lookup** gives you, what a **Carfax report** costs, and where it fits next to the free tools and cheaper reports in this guide.

What is Carfax?

Carfax, Inc. was founded in 1984 and is based in Virginia; today it is part of S&P Global Mobility. It builds reports from state motor vehicle agencies, insurers, auctions, police, fleets and, above all, a large network of service shops, which is its biggest strength: many Carfax reports list oil changes and repairs other reports never see.

What’s in a Carfax report

- Reported accidents and damage, with severity where known
- Title problems and state title brands (salvage, flood, lemon and others)
- Odometer readings and rollback alerts
- Number of owners, and how long each kept the car
- Type of use: personal, commercial, rental or fleet
- Service and maintenance records
- Open recalls and the last reported mileage
- A history-based value estimate

How to do a Carfax VIN lookup

1. Enter the 17-character VIN, or the license plate and state, on carfax.com.
2. Check that the year, make and model match the car you're looking at.
3. Buy a single report or a multi-report package, or open the free report link on a dealer listing.
4. Read it alongside the free NHTSA and NICB checks and an inspection.

How much is a Carfax report?

A single Carfax report is widely quoted at **$44.99**. Multi-report packages cost more up front but less per car, and dealers pay for Carfax through business accounts. Many shoppers screen cars with a cheaper **VIN report** first; a full CarCheckerVIN report is $14.99, about a third of the price.

The Carfax Buyback Guarantee

If a Carfax report misses a title brand that a DMV had already issued, Carfax may buy the car back under its guarantee. It does not cover accidents, it has deadlines, and the payout is capped. Read the terms before relying on it. Explained at **carcheckervin.com/carfax-buyback-guarantee**.

Carfax for owners

Owners can use a free myCARFAX account to track service history and recalls for cars they already own. It's not a full report on a car you're buying. More at **carcheckervin.com/carfax-my-garage**.

What no report can promise: unreported accidents and cash repairs don't appear in Carfax or any other database, and the Justice Department notes consumers can't get NMVTIS reports from Carfax (dealers only). Compare any VIN at **carcheckervin.com/carfax-vin-check**.

CARFAX VS AUTOCHECK VS CARCHECKERVIN

"**Carfax vs AutoCheck**" is the classic used-car question, and a low-cost report like CarCheckerVIN's now belongs in the same comparison. Each one is strongest at something different.

	Carfax	AutoCheck (Experian)	CarCheckerVIN
Best known for	Service and maintenance history; brand recognition	Auction and dealer data; the AutoCheck Score	Low price, a free preview and auction photos
One report	$44.99 (widely quoted)	Less than Carfax; multi-report packs	**$14.99**
Several cars	Multi-report packages	Multi-report packages	3, 5 or 10-report packs, from $9 a report
Free option	On many dealer listings; myCARFAX for owners	On some dealer and auction listings	Free preview for any VIN, no card
Title brands & odometer	Yes	Yes	Yes, including NMVTIS title records
Liens & auction photos	Varies	Auction records	Lien history and auction sales with photos
Subscription required	No	No	No

Coverage depends on what was reported for each VIN. Carfax and AutoCheck set and change their own prices.

Is Carfax worth it?

Worth paying for when…

- You're down to one car and want the deepest service history
- The car is expensive and the seller didn't include a report

Save your money when…

- You're still comparing several cars: screen them with free previews first
- The dealer already shows a free Carfax: ask for the link

Carfax alternatives

A **Carfax alternative** needn't mean less information. The Justice Department's approved NMVTIS providers, such as VinAudit, ClearVin, EpicVin and GoodCar, sell the federal title and odometer record for a fraction of the price. CarCheckerVIN adds liens, auctions, photos, service records and recalls for $14.99: a **cheap Carfax** substitute for the checks that matter most.

COMPARE

AutoCheck vs Carfax · **VIN check vs Carfax** · **Alternatives to Carfax** · **Is Carfax worth it?** · **Is Carfax accurate?**

A smart way to use both: run a free VIN lookup on every car, buy a $14.99 CarCheckerVIN report on the two or three that pass, then decide whether the final car justifies a $44.99 Carfax for its service records.

HOW TO GET A FREE CARFAX REPORT

"Can I get a **free Carfax report**?" is one of the most common Carfax questions. Sometimes, through a few legitimate routes.

Legitimate ways to get a free Carfax

1. **Dealer listings.** Many dealers pay for a Carfax link on their listings, including on Carfax's own used-car listings and big marketplaces such as Autotrader. If a dealer's ad has no report, ask the salesperson; many will send one.
2. **Ask a private seller.** Some sellers have already bought a report. Ask for the report *link* rather than a screenshot or PDF, and check that the VIN on it matches the car.
3. **AAA membership.** Per AAA's published benefits, Premier members get one free Carfax a year by phone; Classic and Plus members get a discount. Benefits vary by club. See **carcheckervin.com/aaa-carfax-discount**.
4. **myCARFAX for cars you own.** A free account shows service history and recalls for your own vehicle. It's useful when you sell, but it's not a report on a car you're buying.

What doesn't work

- "Free Carfax generator" sites, extensions or forum tricks promising unlimited reports
- A "$1 report" that quietly starts a monthly subscription, or a report a stranger emails you

Watch for fake Carfax reports

Scammers edit real reports or build fakes. Red flags: a PDF or photo instead of a link, a VIN that doesn't match the car, odd fonts, and a seller who won't let you run your own check. Run your own VIN lookup on a site you chose. More at **carcheckervin.com/fake-carfax-report**.

Free alternatives to a Carfax

- **CarCheckerVIN free preview:** decode the VIN and see which records exist, with no card
- **NHTSA recall lookup:** open safety recalls by VIN or plate
- **NICB VINCheck:** insurer theft and total-loss records, 5 searches a day
- **NHTSA VIN decoder:** factory specs straight from the manufacturer

Carfax by license plate

No VIN? Carfax and CarCheckerVIN both search by license plate and state, which finds the VIN through registration data. Try it free at **carcheckervin.com/license-plate-lookup**, or read how a **Carfax license plate lookup** works.

CHEAP CARFAX ALTERNATIVE

Get the free route first: **how to get a free Carfax report** and **free Carfax report by VIN**. When there isn't one, a full CarCheckerVIN report is $14.99 at **carcheckervin.com/cheap-carfax**.

CHAPTER 10

TITLE BRANDS EXPLAINED

A title brand is a permanent label a state adds to a title when something serious has happened to a vehicle. Brands are the single most important thing a **VIN check** can reveal, because they change what a car is worth, whether a lender will finance it and, sometimes, whether it can be insured.

Brand	What it usually means	What to do
Salvage	An insurer declared the vehicle a total loss, usually because repairs would cost more than a set share of its value. Many states don't allow it on the road until it's rebuilt and inspected.	Price far below clean-title value; insist on repair records and an inspection.
Rebuilt / reconstructed	A former salvage vehicle that was repaired and passed a state inspection, so it can be registered again.	Ask who did the work and how; check frame and airbags; expect lower resale value.
Flood / water damage	The vehicle was damaged by water. Flood damage can corrode wiring and electronics months later.	Look for silt, rust under seats and musty smells; many buyers avoid flood cars outright.
Junk / non-repairable	The vehicle is only fit for parts or scrap and generally can't be titled for road use again.	Don't buy as a road vehicle.
Lemon / buyback	The manufacturer repurchased the vehicle under a state lemon law because of a defect it couldn't fix.	Find out what the defect was and whether it was finally repaired.
Not actual mileage	The odometer reading is known to be wrong, for example after tampering or a broken cluster.	Value the car as unknown mileage.
Exceeds mechanical limits	Mileage is beyond what an older odometer could display (for example, past 99,999 on a five-digit unit).	Assume the true mileage is higher than shown.
Fire, hail, theft recovery	State-specific brands for particular kinds of damage or history.	Read the state's definition; inspect accordingly.

Why brands differ by state

Each state writes its own branding rules: the damage threshold for “salvage”, the brand names it uses, and whether a brand is carried forward from another state's title. This patchwork is what makes **title washing** possible: moving a branded car to a state with looser rules in the hope that the brand drops off. NMVTIS was created to stop that by giving every participating state the same national view of a VIN's brand history.

Good to know

A branded title isn't automatically a bad buy. A well-repaired rebuilt car can be good value, as long as you know about the brand and pay a price that reflects it.

CHECK A TITLE

Run a free **salvage title check** at carcheckervin.com to see whether brand records exist for a VIN before you go to see the car.

CHAPTER 11

ODOMETER & MILEAGE CHECKS

Mileage drives a used car's price more than almost anything else, which is exactly why some sellers fake it. NHTSA estimates that **more than 450,000 vehicles are sold each year with false odometer readings**.

What the law says

Federal odometer law (49 U.S.C. Chapter 327) makes it illegal to disconnect, reset or alter an odometer to change the miles shown, and requires the seller to state the mileage in writing when ownership is transferred. If the seller knows the reading is wrong, the law requires a statement saying so on the title. According to NHTSA, a vehicle is exempt from the written disclosure requirement if it is **20 years old or older, or a model year 2010 vehicle or older**. Newer cars stay covered for 20 years, which is why odometer records for recent models are richer than for older ones.

How a VIN lookup exposes a rollback

Every time a car is titled, inspected, auctioned or serviced, the mileage can be recorded against the VIN. A rollback leaves a trail: a reading that goes **down** over time, or a big gap where the miles stop climbing. Digital odometers can be altered with electronic tools and leave no physical marks, so the paper trail matters more than ever.

Date	Source	Miles
2019	Title issued	12
2021	Service visit	31,480
2023	Auction sale	68,900
2025	**Title transfer**	**41,200**

Illustration: a reading that drops between 2023 and 2025 is a red flag for odometer fraud.

Physical clues to check

- Wear on the steering wheel, pedals, shifter and driver's seat that doesn't fit low mileage
- Oil-change stickers or service receipts with higher mileage than the dashboard
- New pedal rubbers or floor mats on a car that looks otherwise used
- Mileage in the history report that doesn't match the title
- Odometer digits that are misaligned or jittery (mechanical units)

MILEAGE CHECK

See a VIN's recorded odometer readings with a free preview at **carcheckervin.com/odometer-check**, then unlock every reading in the full report.

If you think the odometer was rolled back

Don't buy the car. If you already bought it, keep the title, the odometer disclosure statement and any ads, and report it to your state's DMV or attorney general and to NHTSA. Under federal law, a buyer may be able to sue for three times the actual damages or $10,000, whichever is greater, plus attorney's fees, if they can prove the seller intended to defraud them.

CHAPTER 12

RECALL LOOKUP BY VIN

A **VIN recall check** is the one VIN search every owner should repeat regularly, not just before buying. Recall repairs are free, but only if you know about them.

How vehicle recalls work

When a manufacturer or NHTSA determines that a vehicle has a safety-related defect or doesn't comply with a federal safety standard, the manufacturer must notify registered owners and fix the problem free of charge. Recalls are filed with NHTSA under a campaign number. Not every vehicle of a model is affected; the manufacturer identifies the exact range of VINs involved, which is why a VIN search is more accurate than searching by year, make and model.

Using NHTSA's recall lookup

- Search by VIN or by license plate and state at **nhtsa.gov/recalls**.
- A result of "0 unrepaired recalls associated with this VIN" means none are open for that vehicle from that manufacturer.
- Recalls already repaired don't appear.
- Recently announced recalls may not show until the maker loads the VINs, so check again later.
- Recalls more than 15 years old, and those from some small or ultra-luxury makers, may be missing.

Buying used? Check recalls twice

Check once when you shortlist the car, and again before you sign. A private seller has no obligation to fix an open recall, but any franchised dealer for that brand will do the repair free for you after the sale. Factor the time without the car into your plans.

Search by model name vs. by VIN

Search engines and databases sometimes list a model under a different name than you'd expect. In NHTSA's recall data, hybrid versions are often filed separately (for example, a Camry Hybrid can be listed as "CAMRY HYBRID", not "CAMRY"), so a model-name search can miss recalls that a VIN search finds. When it matters, always search by the VIN.

FREE RECALL CHECK

Free recall checks and alerts

Check any VIN for open recalls at **carcheckervin.com/recall-check**. CarCheckerVIN's iPhone app also offers free recall alerts, with or without a purchase.

Recalls and the value of a used car

An open recall doesn't lower a car's value much once it's repaired, but some high-profile recalls (airbag inflators, fire risks, "park outside" warnings) can mean waiting weeks for parts. Ask for the dealer's repair order showing the recall was completed, and look for the recall in the history report's service section.

CHAPTER 13

LICENSE PLATE & VIN OWNER LOOKUPS

“Can I find out who owns a car from its VIN?” For the general public, the answer is no. And for good reason. Here's what plate and VIN searches can legally show.

The Driver’s Privacy Protection Act

The federal **Driver's Privacy Protection Act of 1994 (DPPA)**, at 18 U.S.C. § 2721 and following, limits how state motor vehicle departments disclose personal information from their records, such as a person's name, address, phone number, photo and driver's license number. That information can be released only for specific permitted purposes, for example to law enforcement, courts, insurers handling claims, manufacturers sending recall notices, and businesses verifying information the person already provided. Curiosity about who owns a car is not one of them.

What a VIN or plate search can show

- Year, make, model, trim and specifications
- Title brands and title states
- The number of owners (but not who they were)
- Odometer readings and recalls
- Liens, auctions and total-loss records

What it won’t show (by law)

- Owners' names and home addresses
- Phone numbers and email addresses
- Driver's license numbers and photos
- Social Security numbers and medical information

Be wary of “owner lookup” promises

Sites that promise to reveal a car owner's name and address from a VIN for a fee should be treated with suspicion. Legitimate vehicle history providers don't disclose personal information covered by the DPPA. If you need to identify an owner for a legal reason, such as an accident, an abandoned vehicle on your property or a court case, go through the police, your insurer, an attorney or your state DMV's formal request process.

When a plate lookup is the right tool

A **license plate lookup** is ideal when you have a plate but no VIN: a car parked for sale with a phone number in the window, an online listing photo, or a dealer lot. The plate search returns the VIN and the vehicle details, and from there every VIN lookup in this guide applies. Remember that plates can be transferred between vehicles and are reissued, so the vehicle the plate is on today should match the decoded result.

Getting your own records

You can always request records about your own vehicle and yourself from your state DMV, including title history and registration records. If you are buying from a private seller, asking them to show the title and registration in person is free, and it confirms they are the person legally able to sell the car.

PLATE TO VIN

Find a VIN from a U.S. license plate at **carcheckervin.com/license-plate-lookup**. CarCheckerVIN reports never include owners' personal information.

CHAPTER 14

MOTORCYCLES, TRAILERS, BOATS & CLASSICS

The 17-character rule covers far more than cars. Motorcycles and trailers built since 1981 have full VINs, while boats use a different number entirely.

Motorcycles

A **motorcycle VIN lookup** works exactly like a car's: 17 characters, with WMI, VDS, check digit, model year and serial. The VIN is usually stamped on the **steering head** (the frame tube at the front, visible with the handlebars turned) and printed on a frame label; many bikes also carry an engine number on the crankcase that is *not* the VIN. NICB notes that VINCheck covers some motorcycles. Start at carcheckervin.com/motorcycle-vin-lookup.

Trailers

Utility, boat, cargo and travel trailers made for U.S. roads carry 17-character VINs, typically on a plate or sticker on the **tongue** or front frame rail. Small trailer builders often use a "9" in position 3 because they produce fewer than 1,000 units a year. Homemade trailers may have a state-assigned VIN instead. See carcheckervin.com/trailer-vin-lookup.

RVs and motorhomes

A motorhome has a chassis VIN from the chassis maker (on the dashboard and door frame) and usually a separate coach serial number from the body builder. Use the chassis VIN for title, recall and history searches.

Boats: the HIN

Boats don't have VINs. They carry a 12-character **Hull Identification Number (HIN)** under U.S. Coast Guard rules (33 CFR Part 181), usually on the upper starboard corner of the transom. The first three characters are the **Manufacturer Identification Code (MIC)**, the next five are the hull serial number, and the last four encode the month and year of production and the model year. NICB points boat buyers to dedicated boat history services.

Heavy trucks & buses

Commercial trucks and buses use the same 17-character VIN. Look on the driver's door frame and on the frame rail. Commercial vehicles often have long fleet histories, so odometer and lien records are especially valuable.

Classic cars (pre-1981)

Older vehicles have manufacturer-specific numbers of 5 to 13 characters. Their decoding depends on the brand and year: a 1969 Ford, a 1972 Chevrolet and a 1978 Toyota each follow a different scheme. Expect to use marque-club charts, factory documentation such as build sheets and data plates, and a careful look at the title. Classic-car fraud often involves cloning a cheaper model into a rarer one, so verify numbers-matching claims with an expert.

Grey-market imports

Vehicles imported from outside North America may have VINs without a check digit, or a non-U.S. character layout. Check import paperwork (EPA and DOT forms) along with the VIN.

CHAPTER 15

WINDOW STICKER & BRAND VIN LOOKUPS

Want to know exactly how a car left the factory: every option, package and the original price? A **window sticker by VIN** lookup recreates it.

The Monroney label

The window sticker is officially the **Monroney label**, required on new cars since the **Automobile Information Disclosure Act of 1958**. It lists the manufacturer's suggested retail price (MSRP), standard equipment, each factory option and its price, destination charges, EPA fuel economy and environment ratings, NHTSA safety ratings when the model has been rated, and where the vehicle and its parts were made. For a used car, a recreated window sticker settles arguments about trim level and options, which is worth real money when two cars that look alike are priced $3,000 apart.

WINDOW STICKER

Look up a free window sticker by VIN at **carcheckervin.com/free-window-sticker-by-vin**, and learn how to read every section of the label at **carcheckervin.com/monroney-label**.

Build sheet vs. window sticker

A build sheet is the factory's internal production record, with paint, trim and component codes. The window sticker is the consumer price label. Some brands can reproduce both from the VIN.

VIN lookup by brand

Brand-specific searches like **Ford VIN lookup** and **Toyota VIN lookup** are popular because each maker encodes positions 4–8 differently. A brand decoder knows, for example, which character holds a Ford's engine code or a Toyota's grade. CarCheckerVIN has a page for each major make:

Make	Common WMIs	Brand VIN lookup
Ford	`1FA, 1FT, 1FM, 3FA`	carcheckervin.com/ford-vin-lookup
Chevrolet	`1G1, 1GC, 3GN`	carcheckervin.com/vin-decoder/chevrolet
Toyota	`4T1, 5TD, JTD, 2T1`	carcheckervin.com/vin-decoder/toyota
Honda	`1HG, 5FN, JHM, 2HG`	carcheckervin.com/vin-decoder/honda
Nissan	`1N4, 5N1, JN1`	carcheckervin.com/vin-decoder/nissan
Jeep / Ram	`1C4, 1C6, 3C6`	carcheckervin.com/jeep-vin-lookup
Hyundai / Kia	`KMH, 5NP / KNA, 5XY`	carcheckervin.com/vin-decoder/hyundai
Tesla	`5YJ, 7SA`	carcheckervin.com/vin-decoder/tesla
BMW / Mercedes	`WBA, 5UX / WDD, 4JG`	carcheckervin.com/vin-decoder/bmw

Every brand page is listed at **carcheckervin.com/brand-vin-lookup**. Each brand page explains that maker's position-by-position codes.

CHAPTER 16

VIN FRAUD: RED FLAGS EVERY BUYER SHOULD KNOW

The VIN system is strong, but criminals know how buyers use it. These are the schemes a careful **VIN search** helps you catch.

VIN cloning

Thieves copy the VIN of a legitimately registered car of the same make, model and color onto a stolen one, with fake dashboard plates, door labels and sometimes forged titles. The cloned VIN passes the check digit and returns a clean history, because it *is* a clean car's history, just not this car's.

Catch it: compare the VIN in every location, including hidden ones on parts and the frame; look for records showing the "same" car in another state at the same time; be wary of prices far below market.

Title washing

A salvage or flood car is retitled through one or more states with weaker rules until the brand disappears from the paper title.

Catch it: a history report that draws on NMVTIS shows the brand history across states even when the current title looks clean.

Odometer rollback

The mileage is reduced to raise the price (Chapter 11).

Catch it: odometer readings that drop over time.

Curbstoning

Unlicensed dealers pose as private sellers to dodge dealer laws, often selling flood, salvage or rolled-back cars from parking lots and online ads.

Catch it: the seller's name isn't on the title, the same phone number appears in several ads, or the title was signed over to someone else and left open.

Flood cars after storms

After major hurricanes, water-damaged vehicles are cleaned up and moved to other regions for sale.

Catch it: title records from storm areas right after a disaster, NICB flood records, damp carpets, silt and corrosion.

Fake history reports

Scammers send a buyer a doctored report, or send them to a lookalike site.

Catch it: run your own VIN lookup on a site you chose, not one the seller links you to.

The "vehicle history report" text scam

A common scam targets *sellers*: a fake buyer texts that they'll buy your car but first need a report from a specific website, which then takes your card details. A real buyer can run their own VIN check with the VIN you give them. Never pay for a report on a site a stranger picks for you.

INDEPENDENT CHECK

Type the VIN yourself at **carcheckervin.com**, a site you chose, and compare the result with any report the seller shows you.

CHAPTER 17 · PRINT ME

THE USED-CAR VIN CHECKLIST

Print this page and take it with you. Tick each box before you hand over money.

Before you visit

- [ ] Get the full 17-character VIN from the seller or listing
- [ ] Decode it: year, make, model, trim and engine match the ad
- [ ] Check digit validates (no typo, no invented VIN)
- [ ] Run NHTSA's recall lookup and note open recalls
- [ ] Run NICB VINCheck for theft and total-loss records
- [ ] Preview the history for free at carcheckervin.com
- [ ] Compare the asking price with similar cars

At the car

- [ ] Dashboard VIN matches the listing VIN
- [ ] Door-jamb label VIN matches, and the label looks original
- [ ] No tool marks or odd rivets on the VIN plate
- [ ] Odometer reading fits the car's wear and service stickers
- [ ] No silt, rust or musty smell (flood signs)
- [ ] Build date on the door label fits the model year

Paperwork

- [ ] Title VIN matches the car, character for character
- [ ] The seller's name is on the title (no “open” title)
- [ ] Title has no brand, or the price reflects the brand
- [ ] No unpaid lien, or a lien release from the lender
- [ ] Odometer disclosure completed where required
- [ ] Recall repair orders, if any recalls were completed

Final checks

- [ ] Full vehicle history report reviewed (titles, mileage, owners, liens, auctions)
- [ ] Odometer readings rise steadily in the report
- [ ] Pre-purchase inspection by an independent mechanic
- [ ] Test drive on city streets and highway
- [ ] Payment method is traceable (no cash in a parking lot)
- [ ] Bill of sale lists the VIN, price, date and both parties

ONE STOP

Decode, preview and report at **carcheckervin.com/vin-lookup**: free preview, $14.99 full report.

Notes

REFERENCE

GLOSSARY OF VIN TERMS

Check digit
The 9th VIN character, calculated from the other 16 to detect errors. Values 0–9 or X.

Clean title
A title with no brand. It doesn't guarantee the car was never damaged, only that no brand was recorded.

Curbstoning
Unlicensed dealing disguised as private sales.

DPPA
Driver's Privacy Protection Act of 1994; limits disclosure of personal data from DMV records.

GVWR
Gross vehicle weight rating: the maximum loaded weight. The 7th-character year rule applies at 10,000 lb or less.

HIN
Hull Identification Number: the 12-character identifier for boats.

Lemon buyback
A vehicle repurchased by its manufacturer under a state lemon law.

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

MIC
Manufacturer Identification Code: the first three characters of a HIN.

Model year
The year a manufacturer designates for a model; encoded in VIN position 10. It can differ from the build year.

Monroney label
The federally required new-car window sticker listing MSRP, equipment and fuel economy.

MSRP
Manufacturer's suggested retail price.

NHTSA
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: issues the VIN rule and runs the decoder and recall lookup.

NICB
National Insurance Crime Bureau: runs the free VINCheck theft and total-loss lookup.

NMVTIS
National Motor Vehicle Title Information System, run by the U.S. Department of Justice; links state title, insurance and salvage data.

Odometer disclosure
The seller's written mileage statement at transfer, required by federal law for non-exempt vehicles.

Plant code
VIN position 11; identifies the assembly plant, defined by each manufacturer.

Rebuilt title
A brand for a salvage vehicle that was repaired and passed a state inspection.

Salvage title
A brand for a vehicle declared a total loss, usually by an insurer.

Title washing
Moving a branded vehicle between states to obtain a title without the brand.

Total loss
When repair costs exceed a set share of a vehicle's value and the insurer pays out instead.

VDS
Vehicle Descriptor Section: VIN positions 4–8 (model, body, engine, restraints).

VIN
Vehicle Identification Number: the 17-character code that uniquely identifies a vehicle (model year 1981 onward).

VIN cloning
Putting a legitimate vehicle's VIN on a stolen vehicle.

VIN verification
A physical inspection confirming a vehicle's VIN, often required to title an out-of-state car.

VIS
Vehicle Identifier Section: positions 10–17 (year, plant, serial).

vPIC
NHTSA's Product Information Catalog and Vehicle Listing, the database behind its VIN decoder.

WMI
World Manufacturer Identifier: VIN positions 1–3.

ANSWERS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Can I search up a VIN number for free?

Yes. NHTSA's decoder, NHTSA's recall lookup and NICB VINCheck are free, and CarCheckerVIN's VIN lookup decodes the VIN and shows a free history preview with no card required.

How do I check my VIN number online?

Copy the 17 characters from your dashboard, door jamb, title or insurance card, then enter them in a VIN lookup tool such as carcheckervin.com/vin-lookup.

Can you get car specs from the VIN?

Yes. A VIN decoder returns year, make, model, trim, body, engine, transmission, plant and, through a window sticker lookup, the factory options and original MSRP.

Is a VIN lookup the same as a VIN check?

People use the terms interchangeably. Strictly, a lookup or decoder identifies the vehicle, and a check searches its records for problems such as title brands or total-loss reports.

What does the 10th digit of a VIN mean?

It's the model year code. For example, “R” is 2024, “S” is 2025 and “T” is 2026.

Can two cars have the same VIN?

Not legitimately within the 30-year year-code cycle. Two vehicles showing the same VIN suggests cloning or a clerical error, and needs investigating.

Do electric cars have VINs?

Yes. EVs and hybrids use the same 17-character VIN; the descriptor section often encodes the motor or battery. Decoding, recall and history lookups work the same way.

What if a VIN lookup finds nothing?

Check for a typo first (the check digit helps). Pre-1981 vehicles, grey-market imports and brand-new vehicles may not appear in every database yet. Confirm the VIN from a second location on the car.

Can a VIN lookup show accidents?

A full history report can include reported damage and insurance total-loss records, but many accidents are never reported to any database. Always pair a report with an inspection.

Can I find the owner of a car by VIN?

Not as a member of the public. The DPPA restricts personal information in DMV records. Legitimate reports show the number of owners, not their identities.

How long is a VIN?

17 characters for vehicles from model year 1981 onward. Older vehicles have shorter, manufacturer-specific numbers.

How much is a Carfax report?

A single Carfax report is widely quoted at $44.99. Many dealers include one free on their listings (Chapter 9).

Where can I buy a cheap VIN report?

At carcheckervin.com: a full report is $14.99, or $9–$12 a report in packs, after a free preview.

How much does a vehicle history report cost?

Prices vary by provider; a single Carfax is widely quoted at $44.99. A full CarCheckerVIN report is $14.99, after a free preview.

Is it safe to give a buyer my VIN?

Yes. It is visible through your windshield anyway and doesn't reveal your personal information. Just don't let a buyer pick the report website for you.

FREE VIN LOOKUP

Look up any VIN in seconds.

Decode the year, make, model and specs, preview the vehicle's history free, and unlock a full report for $14.99.

carcheckervin.com/vin-lookup →

Scan for a free VIN lookup

Sources

- 49 CFR Part 565, Vehicle Identification Number requirements
- 49 CFR Part 541, Federal motor vehicle theft prevention standard
- NHTSA, VIN Decoder and vPIC (nhtsa.gov/vin-decoder; vpic.nhtsa.dot.gov)
- NHTSA, Check for Recalls (nhtsa.gov/recalls)
- NHTSA, Odometer Fraud (nhtsa.gov/vehicle-safety/odometer-fraud)
- 49 U.S.C. Chapter 327, Odometers
- NICB, VINCheck (nicb.org/vincheck)
- U.S. DOJ / BJA, NMVTIS Vehicle History (vehiclehistory.bja.ojp.gov)
- 18 U.S.C. § 2721 et seq., Driver's Privacy Protection Act
- 33 CFR Part 181, Hull identification numbers
- Automobile Information Disclosure Act of 1958 (15 U.S.C. § 1231 et seq.)
- Carfax price: independent pricing listings, 2026; AAA published member benefits

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
Free VIN check
License plate lookup
Recall check
Window sticker by VIN
NMVTIS VIN check
Salvage title check
Odometer check
Vehicle lien check

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