Used BMW 3 Series inspection checklist

What to check on a used 3 Series, what a problem looks like, and when to walk away.

COVERS **E90** 2005–2012 | **F30** 2012–2019 | **G20** 2019 on

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☐ **Tick it** if it's fine. **Cross it** if it isn't, and note what you found so you can price it into your offer.

! **Safety critical:** affects how safely it drives or protects you in a crash. Best to have a mechanic check it before you buy.

$ **Negotiate:** costs money to fix, from wear to major repairs. Get a quote and take it off the price.

1 Exterior

- ☐ **Panel gaps.** Check panel gaps, paint colour match and door and boot seals for overspray or uneven gaps that point to crash repair. A colour mismatch between a door and its surrounding panel often shows through in bright sunlight. $
- ☐ **Run-flat tyres.** Check the tyre sidewalls for a run-flat marking and confirm all four tyres match, since run-flats wear faster and cost more to replace than normal tyres. Mismatched tyres on one axle can affect handling and stability control. $
- ☐ **Alloy wheels.** Check all four wheels for kerbing, cracks or signs of refurbishment, especially on larger optional wheel sizes. A cracked rim near the valve stem is easy to miss but can let air leak slowly. $

2 Under the bonnet

- ☐ **Engine oil.** Pull the dipstick or check the digital oil level reading and confirm the oil looks brown, not black or gritty. Many of these engines use oil between services, so check the seller's top-up history too. $
- ☐ **Oil leaks.** Look over the top and sides of the engine for oily film or wet patches, particularly around gaskets and seals. A seeping gasket starts as a light film and worsens into drips over time. $
- ☐ **Coolant.** Check the coolant reservoir is at the mark and the coolant looks clean, not rusty or oily. Frequent top-ups point to a slow leak somewhere in the cooling system. $
- ☐ **Cold start rattle.** Ask to start the car from cold and listen closely for the first 10-20 seconds before the engine warms up. A rattle that fades as revs rise points to timing chain wear, which gets louder and costlier over time. $
- ☐ **Belts.** Look over the drive belts for cracking, fraying or glazing without touching anything while the engine runs. A perished belt can snap and leave you stranded. $
- ☐ **Diesel exhaust fluid.** Diesel: check the AdBlue/exhaust fluid level if a filler is fitted, usually near the fuel cap or under the bonnet. Running out stops the engine from restarting until it's topped up. $

3 Underbody and wheels

- ☐ **Structural rust.** Look under the car at the floor pans and around suspension mounting points for rust, fresh welds or new coating. A patch of fresh underseal in one spot can hide a repaired impact. !
- ☐ **Suspension bushes.** Grab the front anti-roll bar links and control arm bushes where visible and check for cracking or looseness; a clunk over bumps on test drive confirms wear. Worn bushes make the car feel vague and knock over small bumps. $
- ☐ **Shock absorbers.** Push down hard on each corner and let go; the car should bounce once and settle, not keep bouncing. Oily residue on a shock body means it's leaking and losing control. $
- ☐ **Rear differential.** Look underneath at the rear differential housing for oil weeping around seals. A wet patch here points to a leak that needs sealing before it runs dry. $
- ☐ **Brake discs.** Look through the wheel spokes at the brake discs for deep grooves or a raised outer lip. A lip you can feel with a fingernail means the discs are due for replacement. $

4 Interior and electrics

- ☐ **Warning lights.** Turn the ignition on without starting the engine; every dash light should come on then go out once running. An airbag or ABS light staying on needs an explanation before buying. !
- ☐ **Seatbelts.** Pull each seatbelt fully out and let it retract, checking the webbing for fraying and the buckle for a solid click. A belt that doesn't retract smoothly may not hold properly in a crash. !
- ☐ **iDrive screen.** Work through the iDrive menus, Bluetooth pairing and navigation to check the screen responds without freezing or rebooting. A screen that lags or drops connection points to a software or module fault. $
- ☐ **Sunroof.** If fitted, open and close the sunroof fully and listen for grinding, and check it seals without water marks on the headliner. A sunroof that sticks partway often needs its track cleaned or motor replaced. $

! **Stay safe.** Never go under a car held up only by a jack, and never open the radiator or coolant cap on a hot engine. Keep hands, hair and loose clothing clear of fans and belts when the engine is running, and do checks under the bonnet with it switched off where you can. On the test drive, hold a current licence, confirm the car is registered and insured, obey road rules, and only brake hard when the road behind is clear. Meet in a safe, public-facing place, take someone with you, and don't carry large amounts of cash to a viewing.

5 Test drive

- [ ] **Automatic gearbox.** Drive normally and pay attention to every gearshift from a stop and at cruising speed. A flare in revs, a thump into gear, or hesitation points to a worn automatic transmission. $
- [ ] **Manual clutch.** Manual: pull away in first gear and change through the gears, feeling for a clutch that bites high, slips under load or feels notchy. A clutch biting near the top of its travel is close to needing replacement. $
- [ ] **Steering feel.** At low speed with the wheel turned, feel and listen for vibration or whining through the electric power steering. A steady vibration through the wheel points to a steering system fault. $
- [ ] **Brakes.** Brake firmly from speed on a quiet road; the car should stop straight without pulling, pulsing or grinding. Any vibration through the pedal points to warped discs. !

6 Documentation

- [ ] **Seller's ID.** Check the seller's photo ID matches the name on the rego papers, and that the VIN on those papers matches the VIN plate on the car.
- [ ] **Service history.** Ask for the logbook or digital service records showing regular oil and coolant changes, and whether the timing chain or VANOS solenoids have ever been replaced. Gaps in servicing make future engine problems more likely. $

What this guide can't tell you about the 3 Series you're looking at

9+
recalls on 3 Series built since 2005*

23
common faults reported on 3 Series built since 2005*

8,067
owner complaints on 3 Series built since 2006*

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What's each fault worth?
Shufti's negotiation coach turns it into leverage.

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* Shufti analysis, November 2026, of official recall notices, complaints lodged by vehicle owners with vehicle safety regulators, and independent reviews and owner forums. Faults are counted when two or more independent sources report them.

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