

Used Subaru Forester inspection checklist

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



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COVERS **SH 2008–2012** **SJ 2013–2018** **SK 2018–2025** **6th gen 2025 on**

☐ **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.

0 Before you go

- ☐ **Get the VIN and rego** before you travel. A seller who won't share them is a red flag on its own.
- ☐ **Know what you're looking at:** petrol, turbo (XT), diesel or hybrid; manual or CVT automatic. Their checks below are marked.
- ☐ **Ask how it was used:** dirt roads, snow trips, towing, or city only? For an XT, ask about tunes.
- ☐ **Ask for the engine to be cold,** go in daylight, and bring a torch, paper towel and a friend.

1 Exterior

- ☐ **Panels and paint.** Uneven gaps, mismatched colour or overspray on seals and trim mean crash repair. **\$**
- ☐ **Hail and dents.** Look along the roof, bonnet and tailgate at a low angle to the light. **\$**
- ☐ **Dirt-road wear.** Stone-chipped lower doors, scraped bumpers and sills, and roof-rack marks. **\$**
- ☐ **Rust** on older cars: rear wheel arches, sills and the bottom of the tailgate. **\$**
- ☐ **Lights, glass and cameras.** All lights work; windscreen free of chips. The twin cameras behind the mirror (EyeSight) make windscreens costly to replace. **\$**
- ☐ **Doors and tailgate** open, shut and lock cleanly; a power tailgate (if fitted) runs smoothly. **\$**
- ☐ **VIN plate** (in a door frame or under the bonnet) is there, untouched, and matches the papers.

2 Under the bonnet

- ☐ **Engine oil** between the dipstick marks, brown not black. Ask how often it's topped up. **\$**

- ☐ **Coolant** at the mark and a clean colour. Coolant loss, bubbles in the tank or a sweet smell can point to a head gasket leak. **\$**
- ☐ **Brake fluid** (small tank at the back of the engine bay) is clear to light amber, not dark. **\$**
- ☐ **Belts, hoses and battery.** No cracked belts or swollen hoses; clean battery terminals and a date sticker. **\$**
- ☐ **Leaks.** Look low on both sides of the engine, where oil leaks collect on this engine layout. **\$**
- ☐ **Turbo (XT): modifications.** An extra box wired into the engine, a loud "whoosh" valve or aftermarket intake means it's been tuned.
- ☐ **Cold start.** Starts easily and settles to a smooth idle. A knock or tapping that fades as it warms, or smoke, needs a mechanic. **\$**

3 Underbody and wheels

- ☐ **Four matching tyres.** Same brand, size and similar wear, under ~6 years old. Mismatched tyres strain the all-wheel-drive system. **\$**
- ☐ **Drive parts.** No oil leaking from the rear axle; no split rubber boots behind the wheels (grease sprayed around). **\$**
- ☐ **Rust and crash repairs.** Rust on the floor or around the suspension; bent metal, fresh welds or new black coating in one spot. **!**
- ☐ **Scrapes and drips.** Dents underneath from dirt roads; drips where it's normally parked. **\$**
- ☐ **Suspension.** Push down on each corner: it should bounce back once and settle. Oily shock absorbers leak. **\$**
- ☐ **Brakes.** Deep grooves or a raised edge on the discs mean they're due. **\$**
- ☐ **Exhaust.** Heavy rust, holes or loose heat shields that rattle. Diesel: heavy soot at the tailpipe. **\$**

! 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.

4 Interior and electrics

- ☐ **Warning lights.** Key to "on": every dash light comes on, then goes out once running. An airbag, brake, engine or AWD warning that stays on needs explaining.

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- ☐ **Driver assists (EyeSight)** show no fault message. A fault after a windscreen swap can mean the cameras weren't set up properly.

\$
- ☐ **Wear matches the kilometres.** Steering wheel, pedals, driver's seat and cargo area.

\$
- ☐ **Seatbelts** pull out fully, retract and latch, with no fraying.

!
- ☐ **Air con** blows cold within a minute or two, without a musty smell. A damp headlining can mean blocked sunroof drains.

\$
- ☐ **Electrics.** Screen, Bluetooth/CarPlay, reversing camera, windows and sunroof. Count the keys.

\$

5 Test drive

- ☐ **CVT automatic.** Smooth, steady pull with no judder, surging, slipping or loud whine. Ask when its fluid was changed.

\$
- ☐ **Manual.** In 4th at 50 km/h, floor it: if revs rise faster than speed, the clutch is slipping.

\$
- ☐ **Hybrid.** Moves off smoothly, and the engine joins in with no surges, cut-outs or warnings.

\$

- ☐ **All-wheel drive.** In a car park, drive slowly on full lock both ways: no clunking, juddering or binding.

\$
- ☐ **Brakes.** Firm pedal; stops straight with no pulling, pulsing or grinding.

!
- ☐ **Noises.** Knocks over bumps; a hum that grows with speed (wheel bearing). Turbo: no loud whistle or smoke.

\$
- ☐ **Afterwards,** check for new drips, a steady temperature gauge and no sweet coolant smell.

\$

6 Documentation

- ☐ **Seller's ID** matches the rego papers, and the VIN matches on the papers and VIN plate.
- ☐ **Service history.** Logbook stamped on time, with receipts. Ask when the CVT fluid was last changed, if ever.

\$
- ☐ **Engine and gearbox repairs.** Ask about any head gasket, oil-use or CVT work, and get the paperwork.

\$
- ☐ **Timing belt.** Some older Forester engines use one. Ask when it was last replaced.

\$
- ☐ **Warranty.** A newer Forester may still be under Subaru's new-car warranty. Check the start date and that servicing kept it valid.
- ☐ **Rego and roadworthy.** Rego checked online; roadworthy supplied if your state requires one on sale.

\$

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

10+

recalls on Foresters built since 2008*

28

common faults reported on Foresters built since 2008*

7,093

owner complaints on Foresters built since 2009*

Money owing, stolen or a write-off?

A tidy car can hide all three.

What's each fault worth?

Shufti's negotiation coach turns it into leverage.

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* Shufti analysis, September 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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