

*Protecting Wisconsin Consumers for 75 Years*

## Motor vehicle care & repair tips

The best way to avoid auto repair rip-offs is to be prepared.

Knowing how your vehicle works and how to identify common car problems is a good beginning. It is also important to know how to select a good technician, the kinds of questions to ask, and your consumer rights.

### Repair information

#### Choosing a repair shop

- Ask for recommendations from friends, family, and other people you trust.
- Look for an auto repair shop before you need one to avoid being rushed into a last-minute decision.
- Shop around by telephone for the best deal, and compare warranty policies on repairs.
- Contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection to see if there is a record of complaints about a specific repair shop.
- Make sure the shop will honor your vehicle's warranty.

#### Finding the right technician

- Look for shops that display various certifications – like an Automotive Service Excellence seal. Certification indicates that

some or all of the technicians meet basic standards of knowledge and competence in specific technical areas. Make sure the certifications are current, but remember that certification alone is no guarantee of good or honest work.

- Ask if the technician or shop has experience working on your make and model.

#### Repair charges

Receiving a repair bill that is more than you were told is illegal in Wisconsin. The law includes businesses that install or repair accessories, such as stereos, and covers shops that rebuild parts.

Wisconsin car repair shops must get your authorization for any repair and must offer you an estimate if repairs will cost \$50 or more.

- No unauthorized repairs are allowed. But if you drop off your car before the shop opens with a note to repair something – **and you do not ask them to call you with an estimate** – the shop can charge what it wants.
- A shop may hold your vehicle until you pay for authorized

repairs. However, once you have paid for authorized repairs, the shop cannot keep your vehicle because you refused to pay for **unauthorized repairs**.

- When requesting additional authorization, the shop must tell you both the cost for the additional repairs and the new total cost of the complete job. Make sure you leave a telephone number where the shop can reach you.
- The shop must return replaced parts to you if you ask for them **before** repair begins. Warranty parts or parts exchanged for rebuilding need not be returned, but must be made available to you for inspection.
- When work is completed, the shop must provide you with an invoice describing the repairs, replaced parts (specifying if used or rebuilt), and warranties for repairs and parts.
- If you need expensive or complicated repairs, or if you have questions about their recommended repairs, consider getting a second opinion.

Shops that do only diagnostic work and do not sell parts or

repairs may be able to give you an objective opinion about which repairs are necessary.

- **Double damages** – If the vehicle repair law is violated, you may be able to start an action in Small Claims Court. Wis. Stat. s. 100.20(5) enables consumers to recover twice the amount of any monetary damages, court costs and reasonable attorney's fees.

### Parts are classified as:

- **New** – These parts generally are made to original manufacturer's specifications, either by the vehicle manufacturer or an independent company. Your state may require repair shops to tell you if non-original equipment will be used in the repair. Prices and quality of these parts vary.
- **Remanufactured, rebuilt and reconditioned** – These terms generally mean the same thing: parts have been restored to a sound working condition. Many manufacturers offer a warranty covering replacement parts, but not the labor to install them.
- **Salvage** – These are used parts taken from another vehicle without alteration. Salvage parts may be the only source for certain items, though their reliability is seldom guaranteed.

### After the work is done

- The shop must provide you an invoice describing the work done. The invoice should list each repair, parts replaced, and the cost of each part, labor

charges, the odometer reading when you brought the vehicle in, and the date the vehicle was returned to you.

- The shop must also return parts if you requested them before the repairs began. If the shop needs to return a part under a warranty, the shop must allow you to inspect the parts before your vehicle is returned.

### Preventive maintenance

- Many parts on your vehicle are interrelated. Ignoring maintenance can lead to trouble: specific parts, or an entire system can fail. Neglecting even simple routine maintenance, such as changing the oil or checking the coolant, can lead to poor fuel economy, unreliability, or costly breakdowns. It also may invalidate your warranty.
- Follow the manufacturer's maintenance schedule in your owner's manual for your type of driving.
- Some repair shops create their own maintenance schedules, which call for more frequent servicing than the manufacturer's recommendations. Compare shop maintenance schedules with those recommended in your owner's manual. Ask the repair shop to explain – and make sure you understand – why it recommends service beyond the recommended schedule.

### Warranty & service contracts:

**Warranties** – There is no "standard warranty" on repairs.

Make sure you understand what is covered under your warranty and get it in writing.

Be aware that warranties may be subject to limitations, including time, mileage, deductibles, businesses authorized to perform warranty work or special procedures required to obtain reimbursement.

**Service Contracts** – Many vehicle dealers and others sell optional service contracts issued by vehicle manufacturers or independent companies. Not all service contracts are the same; prices vary and usually are negotiable. To help decide whether to purchase a service contract, consider:

- Its cost.
- The repairs to be covered.
- Whether coverage overlaps coverage provided by any other warranty.
- The deductible.
- Where the repairs are to be performed.
- Required procedures to file a claim, such as prior authorization for specific repairs or meeting required vehicle maintenance schedules.
- Whether repair costs are paid directly by the company to the repair shop or whether you will have to pay first and get reimbursed.
- The reputation of the service contract company. Check it out with the Bureau of Consumer Protection: (800) 422-7128.

## Resolving a dispute

- Document all transactions as well as your experiences with dates, times, expenses, and the names of people you dealt with.
- Talk to the shop manager or owner first. If that does not work, contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection: (800) 422-7128. Another option is to file a claim in small claims court. You do not need an attorney to do this.

## Heading off problems

The more you know about your vehicle, the more likely you will be able to head off repair problems. You can detect many common vehicle problems by using your senses: eyeballing the area around your vehicle, listening for strange noises, sensing a difference in the way your vehicle handles, or even noticing unusual odors.

### Looks like trouble

Small stains or an occasional drop of fluid under your vehicle may not mean much. But wet spots deserve attention; check puddles immediately.

You can identify fluids by their color and consistency:

- Yellowish green, pastel blue or florescent orange colors indicate an overheated engine or an antifreeze leak caused by a bad hose, water pump or leaking radiator.
- A dark brown or black oily fluid means the engine is leaking oil. A bad seal or gasket could cause the leak.

- A red oily spot indicates a transmission or power steering fluid leak.
- A puddle of clear water usually is no problem. It may be normal condensation from your vehicle's air conditioner.

### Smells like trouble

Some problems are under your nose. You can detect them by their odor:

- The smell of burned toast – a light, sharp odor – often signals an electrical short and burning insulation. To be safe, try not to drive the vehicle until the problem is diagnosed.
- The smell of rotten eggs – a continuous burning-sulfur smell – usually indicates a problem in the catalytic converter or other emission control devices. Do not delay diagnosis and repair.
- A thick, acrid odor usually means burning oil. Look for sign of a leak.
- The smell of gasoline vapors after a failed start may mean you have flooded the engine. Wait a few minutes before trying again. If the odor persists, chances are there is a leak in the fuel system – a potentially dangerous problem that needs immediate attention.
- Burning resin or an acrid chemical odor may signal overheated brakes or clutch. Check the parking brake. Stop. Allow the brakes to cool after repeated hard braking on mountain roads. Light smoke coming from a wheel indicates a stuck brake. The vehicle should be towed for repair.

- A sweet, steamy odor indicates a coolant leak. If the temperature gauge or warning light does not indicate overheating, drive carefully to the nearest service station, keeping an eye on your gauges. If the odor is accompanied by a hot, metallic scent and steam from under the hood, your engine has overheated. Pull over immediately. Continued driving could cause severe engine damage. The vehicle should be towed for repair.

### Sounds like trouble

Squeaks, squeals, rattles, rumbles, and other sounds provide valuable clues about problems and maintenance needs. Here are some common noises and what they may mean.

**Squeal** – A shrill, sharp noise, usually related to engine speed:

- Loose or worn power steering, fan or air conditioning belt.

**Click** – A slight sharp noise, related to either engine speed or vehicle speed:

- Loose wheel cover.
- Loose or bent fan blade.
- Stuck valve lifter or low engine oil.

**Screech** – A high-pitched, piercing metallic sound; usually occurs while the vehicle is in motion:

- Caused by brake wear indicators to let you know it is time for maintenance.

**Rumble** – A low-pitched rhythmic sound.

- Defective exhaust pipe, converter or muffler.

- Worn universal joint or other drive-line component.

**Ping** – A high-pitched metallic tapping sound, related to engine speed:

- Usually caused by using gas with a lower octane rating than recommended. Check your owner’s manual for the proper octane rating. If the problem persists, engine ignition timing could be at fault.

**Heavy Knock** – A rhythmic pounding sound:

- Worn crankshaft or connecting rod bearings.
- Loose transmission torque converter.

**Clunk** – A random thumping sound:

- Loose shock absorber or other suspension component.
- Loose exhaust pipe or muffler.

### **Feels like trouble**

Difficult handling, a rough ride, vibration and poor performance are symptoms you can feel and almost always indicate a problem.

### **Steering:**

- Misaligned front wheels and/or worn steering components, such as the idler or ball joint, can cause wandering or difficulty steering in a straight line.
- Pulling – the vehicle’s tendency to steer to the left or right – can be caused by something as routine as under-inflated tires,

or as serious as a damaged or misaligned front end.

### **Ride and handling:**

- Worn shock absorbers or other suspension components – or improper tire inflation – can contribute to poor cornering.
- While there is no hard and fast rule about when to replace shock absorbers or struts, try this test: Bounce the vehicle up and down hard at each wheel and then let go. See how many times the vehicle bounces. Weak shocks will allow the vehicle to bounce twice or more.
- Springs do not normally wear out and do not need replacement unless one corner of the vehicle is lower than the others. Overloading your vehicle can damage the springs.
- Balance tires properly. An unbalanced or improperly balanced tire causes a vehicle to vibrate and may wear steering and suspension components prematurely.

### **Brakes:**

Brake problems have several symptoms. Schedule diagnosis and repair if:

- The vehicle pulls to one side when the brakes are applied.
- The brake pedal sinks to the floor when pressure is maintained.
- You hear or feel scraping or grinding during braking.

- The “brake” light on the instrument panel is lit.

### **Engine:**

The following symptoms indicate engine trouble. Get a diagnosis and schedule the repair.

- Difficulty starting the engine.
- The “check engine” light on the instrument panel is lit.
- Rough idling or stalling.
- Poor acceleration.
- Poor fuel economy.
- Excessive oil use (more than one quart between changes).
- Engine continues running after the key is removed.

### **Transmission:**

Poor transmission performance may come from actual component failure or a simple disconnected hose or plugged filter. Make sure the technician checks the simple items first; transmission repairs normally are expensive. Some of the most common symptoms of transmission problems are:

- Abrupt or hard shifts between gears.
- Delayed or no response when shifting from neutral to drive or reverse.
- Failure to shift during normal acceleration.
- Slippage during acceleration. The engine speeds up, but the vehicle does not respond.

## Trouble shooting

Car trouble does not always mean major repairs. Here are some common causes of trouble and techniques to help you and your technician find and fix problems.

- **Alternator** – Loose wiring can make your alternator appear defective. Your technician should check for loose connections and perform an output test before replacing the alternator.
- **Battery** – Corroded or loose battery terminals can make the battery appear dead or defective. Your technician should clean the terminals and test battery function before replacing the battery.
- **Starter** – What appears to be a defective starter actually may be a dead battery or poor connection. Ask your technician to check all connections and test the battery before repairing the starter.
- **Muffler** – A loud rumbling noise under your vehicle indicates a need for a new muffler or exhaust pipe.
- **Tune-up** – The old-fashioned “tune-up” may not be relevant to your vehicle. Fewer parts, other than belts, spark plugs, hoses and filters, need to be replaced on newer vehicles. Follow the recommendations in your owner’s manual.

For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection.

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**E-MAIL:**  
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(Information taken from "Auto Repair Basics", by the Federal Trade Commission, August 2012 <http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0211-auto-repair-basics>)

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