

Know If You Need Transmission Repair

By Chris Howe

The automatic transmission in your new or used car might have anywhere from three to six speeds, manual shifting features -- in some cases with paddle controls on the steering wheel. Manual transmissions are more sophisticated as well, and even less expensive models have a variety of computer assists and diagnostics to control shifting and acceleration, link them with other operating systems like traction control and anti-lock braking, or even simply control the sheer driving "feel" from highway cruising to "sporty" handling. In addition, your car might have four-wheel or all-wheel drive, and there's also now a "continuously variable" transmission that is configured completely differently from a standard automatic. In other words, you do not want something to happen to your transmission.

First and foremost, you should strictly follow whatever scheduled maintenance is recommended for the vehicle. Everyone knows about changing the oil and filter, but your transmission also uses fluid and, most importantly, also has a filter which needs to be changed. Often wherever you go to change your oil will change all your fluids at the same time, but don't assume this is the case if it's not specified. In general, you should change your transmission fluid and filter every 25,000 average miles – driving conditions as "severe" as a summer with extremely high temperatures requiring you to run the air conditioning constantly can put a strain on your transmission, or driving in heavy traffic or variable terrain with many up-shifts and downshifts, might reduce that to 20,000, 15,000 or even 10,000 miles. Don't despair, however, a fluid change is one of the least expensive things you can have done to your car, and many places from the auto department at your local discount store to freestanding oil and transmission shops like Jiffy Lube and Maaco have specials – just make sure whatever they do to your car doesn't void the warranty. Ask whomever changes your transmission fluid about the kind of driving you do – they're going to have a good idea of your local area, terrain, climate and traffic and be able to recommend a maintenance plan that works for you – in other words, living in Arizona and living in Maine might mean a whole different schedule for your car.

You can also get a transmission inspection, involving broad terms like "testing" and "adjustment" some of which involve actually removing the transmission pan and physically checking the transmission linkage. Unless you are having trouble with your transmission – rough shifting, skipping or not going into gear, not being able to go into Reverse, Park etc. this kind of "routine" maintenance can be a mixed blessing – on the order of "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." Transmissions are so complicated in terms of parts, etc. and such a variety of things can go wrong from the deterioration of a \$20 washer to replacing the whole thing that you should be extremely careful in exposing it to any sort of tinkering – the more you mess with a sealed system, the more likely it is that something will get in there to screw it up – think of any transmission repair or exploration like a major organ transplant, you always, always, always get a second opinion or third if necessary, you always go to the most up to date and qualified specialist – that new continuously variable transmission on your Honda may be something your local

transmission shop has never seen before. Transmission shops will often ask you to approve a “teardown,” which basically means removing the transmission, taking it apart, checking all the pieces and putting it back together. If you must authorize this procedure, make sure you get a written estimate for it (and all transmission work) and make sure it includes the entire procedure in detail – since every state is different, in general make sure you know your rights when it comes to auto repair.

A final word, though it’s uncomfortable to assume that your auto mechanic is dishonest, if you can be there for whatever is being done to your car, so much the better, particularly if your vehicle is particularly sophisticated or expensive. Not only will you be able to see what’s being done to your car, but your presence may help keep the mechanic on his toes and on the straight and narrow.

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