

How To Tell When Your Brakes Need Replacing

By Dan Markham

So how does a driver tell when his or her brakes need servicing? Well, if a driver keeps his eyes or ears open, the brakes may tell you.

Since the late 1970s, most automobiles have been built with a warning indicator that signals when the brake pads are getting worn down. On American-made and Asian-made cars, that indicator is an audible squeal.

Once activated, the noise will be a constant squeal, present even when the brakes aren't applied. In fact, the squeal will disappear when the brakes are hit.

"When the brakes are applied, the warning noise goes away because the indicator has now been forced against the brake rotor and is not able to vibrate," said Austin C. Davis, a Texas automotive service shop owner who operates the automotive tip website, www.TrustMyMechanic.com.

Once the squeal begins, drivers have between 300 and 500 miles before the brake pad is gone, says Charlie Elder, a Florida brake service expert and secretary/treasurer of the Automotive Service Association.

"Some people will keep on driving and hope the noise goes away," Elder says, obviously steering drivers away from that course of action. Once the squeal begins, drivers should take the car in for service.

On European-made cars, the warning indicator is not a sound, but a signal that will light up on the dashboard. Both work equally well, though Elder notes that these may be more expensive to fix, since the sensor often has to be replaced with the brakes.

American and Asian cars only require the brakes be replaced.

Yet not all squeals are alike. Occasional squeals that happen only while braking may be a by-product of the types of brakes used today, and do not necessarily indicate a problem.

"This unfortunately can happen more than you or I want it to. A certain amount of high-pitched brake noise is considered normal these days because of the harder semi-metallic disc brake pads that are used on cars now," says Davis, noting that smaller cars may be more likely to produce the occasional, normal squeals.

However, grinding or scraping noises are not common, and require immediate attention.

"If you start hearing noises you haven't heard, be on the lookout," Elder says. "And if it becomes consistent, you need to get it looked at immediately."

Davis agrees.

“If the pads have worn down to the point where metal-to-metal contact is occurring, your vehicle may not be able to stop safely, and you may damage the brake rotors or drums to the point where they have to be replaced,” Davis says.

On vehicles made before the 1970s, no warning signals were made. And the systems can't be retrofitted to include the indicators.

Therefore, periodic inspections are the best defense against brakes breakdown, Elder says.

“Preventive maintenance is always better than after-the-fact,” he says. “You should get them checked once a year or every 15,000 miles.”

This advice is also sound for late-model owners, because the inspections will provide an estimate as to how many miles the brakes have remaining.

And the vehicle's owner can also estimate when the brakes need replacing by assessing his or her driving habits, Elder says.

“Different driving habits have significant impact on brakes. A cautious driver who travels the interstates may get 60,000 miles, but an aggressive driver on city roads may only get 20,000,” he says.

“(Driving styles) have more of an effect on brakes than anything else,” Elder adds.

Davis says other signs that brakes may need replacing include a different feel when the brake is applied, a change in the way the vehicle brakes (pulling to one side while braking or requiring more pressure on the pads) or a loss of brake fluid.

Elder agrees that paying attention to the brake fluid is critical, particularly for owners of vehicles built in the past 10 years.

“I think of brake fluid as the Maytag Repairman of fluids. People don't think about replacing it,” he says.

However, by not flushing it every two years or 24,000 miles, the brake fluid can stop absorbing moisture, leading to corrosion. That can be expensive, he says.