

**CURRY'S AUTO SERVICE**



complete automotive service

Voted Best Auto Shop by Northern Virginia Magazine

## Car Warning Lights: Myths and Facts

*Curry's Auto Service*

All late model cars are controlled by sophisticated computer systems that monitor an assortment of critical components that include, but are not limited to, the engine, drivetrain, emission's system, electrical system, tire pressure, brakes, airbags, cooling system and suspension. The parameters that control these components are constantly monitored and adjusted according to speed, load, engine temperature, gasoline quality, ambient air temperature, road conditions, etc.

When the computer "senses" the car is operating outside of standard parameters, it stores the corresponding trouble code(s) in its memory and triggers a light that appears on the dash to indicate that there is a problem. A scanner needs to be connected to the car's computer in order to retrieve the stored trouble code(s). Often, the code doesn't tell exactly what's wrong or what component is faulty; it only indicates what system is malfunctioning and where the technician needs to start looking.

Knowing what to do when a light appears on your dash can make the difference between a quick and easy diagnosis or an expensive repair. Here are some of the more important warning lights every driver should be aware of:

### Check Engine Light

Also known as a Service Engine Soon light, it simply means that your vehicle's on-board computer system detected a problem and stored a fault code. In this respect, there are literally hundreds of reasons why a *Check Engine* light icon might appear on your dash, but if it's there, it's on for a reason and needs to be fixed as soon as possible. Depending on the year, make, and model, it may be related to the engine, emission's system, or the transmission. More often than not, the fault code points to a problematic circuit, as opposed to a specific component, sometimes resulting in a lengthy process to identify, diagnose, repair. This is also why each car requires an individual approach before the root cause of the problem is identified and fixed. To avoid potential long-term issues, we strongly recommend that you get it checked out at your earliest convenience or risk damaging the engine or expensive emission components.

**What is the most common reason for a check engine light to illuminate?** Believe it or not, it is a loose or faulty gas cap! After filling up, make sure you secure your cap on tightly.

**What does it mean when the check engine light is flashing?** This indicates a fault that can be damaging to the vehicle's catalytic converter and should be addressed as soon as possible!

### SRS Light (Supplemental Restraint System)

The supplemental restraint system is your airbag system. It may incorporate a variety of active, passive, and even pre-safe technology depending on the vehicle. Given that the SRS system is a safety system, it is well monitored with numerous sensors and automatic self-tests. The slightest malfunction in this system illuminates the SRS light.

**Can the vehicle be driven with an SRS Light on?** Yes, at the owner's risk. There are thousands of vehicles on the road without SRS technology.

**Is the airbag going to blow up?** It's unlikely. When the SRS Light is on the system is inoperative. If you're nervous—tow it!

## ABS Lights

The ABS system helps to keep you from skidding out of control during braking by limiting your wheels from locking up/skidding.

**Do I need brakes?** You might, but that's not why the ABS Light is on. The ABS Warning System does not monitor disc brake pad or disc brake rotor wear (see the Brake Pad light Warning section below).

**Can the vehicle be driven?** Like the SRS system, the vehicle can be driven at the owner's risk as there are many vehicles still on the market without the enhanced safety features of ABS.

**Note:** The ABS system is often integrated with traction control and stability systems, all of which are designed to keep you safe during panic stops, wheel slippage, and handling.

## Low Coolant Light

The Low Coolant Light will come on when the coolant drops below the coolant level sensor—generally one to two quarts. If this light is on, there are two primary possibilities. The most common is a coolant leak. The other is an electrical fault in the warning lamp circuit. Have them checked out.

**Can it be driven?** If there are no major leaks, the vehicle is not overheating (and does not start to overheat), and there is still some evidence of coolant in the overflow bottle, it can be driven. If you can see coolant leaking on the ground (typically a green color), tow it.

## Red Oil Light On

Stop driving immediately and shut the engine off! If a Red Oil Warning Light comes on PAY HEED. The best case scenario is that your engine oil is a little low, or there is an electrical issue with the Oil Level Warning System circuit. Either way you should check your owners' manual and follow the instructions to check your oil.

Add oil as recommended or call Curry's Auto Service 1.888. 8CURRYS

Get your vehicle checked out at your earliest convenience. The worst case scenario is internal engine damage.

**Note:** Many of today's vehicles have very sensitive and sophisticated Oil Level Warning Systems. You may be alerted of oil level too high, or oil level too low. Again, follow your owners' manual's instructions.

## Red Brake Warning Lights

Generally, red warning lights mean DANGER. In the case of a red brake warning light, there may be a hydraulic brake fluid leak. If the brake pedal feels abnormal or spongy—don't drive—tow it!

For Towing assistance call Curry's Auto Service 1.888. 8CURRYS.

Note: Make sure that your emergency brake is not on as this will illuminate a red brake warning light.

## Yellow Brake Warning Light (Brake Pad light)

This is an early warning system for brake pad wear. Essentially, as your disc brake pads wear down, at a certain point a sensor is tripped to alert you that you will need brakes soon.

**Can I drive the vehicle, and for how long?** Yes, you can continue to drive. How long depends on your driving style. In other words, city drivers (city driving is generally harder on brakes due to the constant stop and go) will likely need their brakes addressed before someone who does primarily highway driving.

**Will I do more damage to the brakes?** Depending on how long you continue to drive you could conceivably wear your disc brake pads down to the metal backing plate, which could then damage your disc brake rotors and, in rare cases, the disc brake calipers. If you continue to drive until you hear or feel grinding, you should stop driving (for safety reasons and to prevent extensive damage) have your vehicle towed. On many of today's brake systems, the replacement of the disc brake rotors along with the disc brake pads is required or strongly recommended anyway. Calipers rarely need replacing during regular brake work.

If your yellow brake warning light is on, it is best to have your brakes checked early to decrease the possibility of extensive damage.

**Note:** many of today's brake disc pads and rotors require replacement due to rust and corrosion versus wear; thus rotor replacement is often necessary anyway.

## **Air Suspension Lights (Airmatic, Air Ride, Hydraulic Suspensions)**

Suspension warning lights illuminate when the suspension's monitoring system has detected a fault. Often there is a leak—either air or hydraulic fluid.

**Can your vehicle be driven?** Sometimes, but if the suspension is lower than usual, and/or the vehicle just doesn't feel right—Tow it! Extensive damage could result if the suspension drops too low while driving.

## **Tire Pressure Warning Light**

This recent technological development causes quite a bit of confusion. Put simply, if your tire is getting low on air, your car lets you know via sensors mounted in various places depending on the model.

Sometimes the reset procedure is as simple as pressing a button. Other times one has to set the tire pressures, recalibrate the on-board computer, genuflect and cross two fingers. Check your owners' manual and see the next question... What is the low tire pressure warning light reset procedure? The answer to this simple question depends on the vehicle. Check your owners' manual or call Curry's Auto Service 1.888. 8CURRYS.

**Note:** If you need to add air there is probably an issue with the tires loss of air, you should have a professional inspect your tires as soon as possible.

## **Emission Warning Light**

This light is similar to the Check Engine Light. Many European models such as Volvos have this type of Warning System. It's essentially letting you know that an emissions component has failed or detected a fault. Follow the check engine light tips to address this particular warning light.

**Note:** If the light starts flashing pull over and shut off vehicle immediately. Restart vehicle if light is not flashing drive to a Currys Auto Service as soon as possible. If the light continues to flash, shut of vehicle and have it towed. A flashing light usually means the catalytic convertor(s) are being damaged.

## **Resetting Oil Lights**

Next to resetting check engine lights, resetting oil lights is the most common question we receive. Whether it's a Toyota Oil Light Reset Procedure, an Oil Change Warning Light Reset Procedure on a 2005 GMC Envoy, or the process to reset a 1999 BMW M3 Oil Service Light, they all require a specific course of action.

Most owners' manuals have this information. You should find it under maintenance or oil service.

**Note:** Many European models require special tools to reset the oil service light, when in doubt, it's best to call Curry's Auto Service 1.888. 8CURRYS, we reset oil service lights everyday on a variety of models.