

# AUTOMATIC TRANSMISSION SERVICE



Ralph Seekins

A good friend of mine recently asked me to drive his car for him to see if I thought there might be something wrong with the automatic transmission. He said it seemed to take a little too long to engage when he put it in “Drive” or “Reverse” and there was a “clunk” when he did either one.

The first thing I did was check the transmission fluid. I let the engine idle while on level ground with the transmission in “Park.” Then, I removed the dipstick, wiped it clean with a paper towel, put it all the way back in, and pulled it back out. The fluid was at the proper level but its color was a dark brown rather than the normal red color. That led me to smell the fluid. It had a distinct “burnt” smell. Not good!

After putting the dipstick back in place and closing the hood, I got in the car and moved the gearshift lever to “Drive” while holding my foot on the brake. There was indeed a delay between the time I selected “Drive” and the time the transmission actually engaged – and then it noticeably “clunked”

rather than engaging smoothly. This was also not good!

That was enough for me. My recommendation was that he arrange for an expert diagnosis by a qualified automatic transmission technician as soon as possible. He did as I recommended and his concerns turned into a rather expensive but necessary transmission repair.

Afterward, my friend told me he may have caused the problem himself. It seems he got stuck in a boggy area in the field near his house and, rather than getting pulled out, he vigorously rocked the car back and forth until he finally got out – about a half hour later. He told me he had smelled something “hot” at the time but the smell went away after he left the scene. “Yup,” I said. “That probably did it.”

All this is to say that, even though today’s automatic transmissions are more reliable than ever, they can be damaged rather easily and when they do break they are generally very expensive to repair. When a transmission shows any symptom of malfunction, it is very wise to get a quick check by a qualified technician as quickly as possible. The longer you wait to have any adverse symptom checked out, the more likely the repair will increase in cost.

You can run a basic transmission test yourself. On a periodic basis, every three months or so, run

through this sequence. With the engine running, and the transmission in “Park,” open the hood, pull the transmission dipstick, clean it with a rag or paper towel, put the dipstick back in place, and pull it out again. The level should read “full” and the fluid should be clean and red. If the fluid looks discolored or dirty, take a quick smell. It should not have a “burnt” smell. Then, after putting the dipstick back in place and closing the hood, get in the car and with your foot on the brake, move the shift lever from “Park” to “Drive.” There should be a smooth take-up rather than a “clunk.” Then move the lever to “neutral” and then back and forth to “Reverse” and “Drive” several times. Once again, low, dirty, or smelly fluid or an obvious “clunk” when engaging is an indication of a concern that needs professional attention. See your vehicle manufacturer’s local dealer or feel free to stop by our Quick Lane Tire and Auto Center for a no-charge, no-obligation check up. With luck, all you may need is a transmission service. At best, you can get a repair before it causes other internal damage and becomes even more expensive.

Good luck and safe driving.

*Ralph Seekins has more than 40 years’ experience in the automotive industry. He started as a mechanic, worked in sales, and for the past 32 years, has been the owner of Seekins Ford Lincoln Mercury.*