

“CHECK ENGINE” LIGHT

By: Ralph Seekins

Question: The yellow “check engine” light on my car’s dashboard keeps coming on. I check the oil, the coolant, the transmission fluid but can’t seem to find anything wrong. What is happening? What does it mean?

I hear this question more than just about any other vehicle operating question – particularly in cold weather. There are a whole flock of indicator lights, bells and buzzers on most vehicle instrument panels. It’s always a very good idea to review your owner’s manual to familiarize yourself with what they mean. For Ford vehicles the explanations are in the “Instrument Cluster” section.

Warning lights and gauges are there to alert you of a condition that may become serious enough to cause expensive repairs. A warning light will light up when a problem exists with one of your vehicle’s functions. As you start your vehicle, all the lights should come on. Then, as the on board computer finds that the individual components are working properly, the lights should go off. If a light stays on for more than a couple minutes, you may have a problem. Make a quick check in your owner’s manual (kept in the vehicle’s glove box) to see what system is in trouble.

A rule of thumb in the automobile business is to treat dash lights like traffic signals. A yellow light means proceed with caution and pay close attention. A red light means immediate danger - pull over as soon as it’s safe to do so and shut the engine off. Most often a red light means there is a major problem like brake failure, engine overheating, low oil pressure, transmission overheating or a failure in the electrical system.

Solid Yellow Light = “Proceed with Caution.” The on board computer diagnostic system has detected a malfunction and is telling you something is wrong. I call it the “take me to the doctor” light. It’s probably not an emergency room visit – particularly if the engine seems to be running smoothly – but it needs to be checked out soon. However, before calling for help, I recommend shutting the engine down and restarting it several times to see if the light stays on. Sometimes the malfunction light could be triggered by cold operating temperatures causing a sensor to take longer to be fully operational than it would be if warmed up or was operating in warmer temperatures. Common things that cause a solid yellow light are faulty sensors, anti-lock brake sensors, safety restraint systems or computer failures. Again, restart the vehicle several times to see if the light stays on. If it does stay on, have it checked by your repair shop.

Blinking Yellow Light = “Engine Misfire.” This failure can cause damage to the very expensive and necessary catalytic converter. Drive in a moderate fashion without heavy acceleration or deceleration and have the vehicle serviced immediately.

Red Light = “DANGER – STOP QUICKLY.” Things to look for when a red light comes on are: low anti-freeze (DO NOT remove radiator cap when the engine is hot or running), engine oil, or transmission fluid levels, low brake fluid, missing belts, faulty alternator, or a bad battery.

I recommend that, when you take your vehicle to the repair shop, you start the engine and point out which light is causing your concern. Believe it or not, a light that goes on for you may not go on for a technician when the vehicle is in the shop. In that case, the technician may not be able to determine the malfunction – wasting both your time and the repair shop's time.

Finally, when in doubt, call your repair shop. We always want to make sure you have any malfunction quickly diagnosed and repaired for your safety and for that of those around you.