

Wheels: An e-mail from Saul says, “I have been a regular reader of your column for many years. I usually find your responses to be clear, explicit, and complete. But your last column on “To Flush or Not to Flush” automatic transmissions left me confused. I am an engineer and avid car mechanic. For years I’ve puzzled over the issue of whether or not to change out and/or flush the ATF in my cars that have automatic transmissions. I’ve received conflicting recommendations from owner’s manuals, transmission rebuilders, and automotive experts such as yourself. It helps me to be specific, so here are 4 scenarios:

1. Assume you own a new G20 Chevy van that is used almost exclusively for long trips out of town. No towing is done with this van. If you owned such a van, how frequently would you change out the ATF (mileage and/or time), and would you flush it? Or would you not bother to change out the ATF?
Now assume this same Chevy van already has over 100,000 miles on it, the ATF has never been changed since the van was new, and that these 100,000 miles were virtually all long distance freeway miles. What would you do with the ATF at this point?
2. Switch the scenario. You own a passenger car, a Saab 9-5 station wagon, where the miles put on it are about 50/50 between local trips around town of less than five miles, and longer trips that range from 25 miles to several hundred miles. If you owned this vehicle, what would you do concerning changing/flushing the ATF?
3. One more scenario, which may just confuse things. You own a 1998 Jaguar XJ8, which has a sealed automatic transmission, and the manufacturer says to never change or flush the ATF. What is your opinion on dealing with the ATF on this car?

Thanks in advance for your response.”

Halderman: These are great questions. 1. The Chevy van with 100,000 should have the transmission fluid changed because GM says to at that mileage as long as you were not towing. 2. Regarding the Saab, I suggest that you replace the fluid regularly, such as every 30,000 miles. I change transaxle fluid every 20,000 miles to 30,000 miles and just drain and replace three quarts of fluid, drive the vehicle around the block, and change three more quarts. I notice an improvement every time I do this and the fluid looks clearer as well. Highly friction modified ATF will discolor faster than just friction-modified fluid, so don’t let the color itself be an indicator. 3. Regarding the Jaguar, I think I would check it at 50,000 miles and change it at 100,000 miles.

