

Wheels: An e-mail from Tom says, "I have owned this delightful 1996 Chevrolet Lumina with ABS brakes for close to 10 years. I have put 6 pairs of pads on the front in this 10 year period but have not had to touch the rear shoes. My real concern is that no one, including GM, can tell me why from day one I have had a very low brake pedal. The pedal feels like it is on the floor when you must make a panic stop and you sure get a nervous feeling. I have had so many mechanics work on this car that it is now getting to be cost prohibitive. As I write this e-mail, I had the brakes checked by my old shade tree mechanic and the front ceramic pads are holding up the best yet, since October, 2004. They show very little wear in nearly two years and/or 15,000 miles of all city driving. I hope I have given you enough information so that you can give me an answer. Thank you."

Halderman: If the vehicle is equipped with rear disc brakes, this is a common problem and you are correct that there is not much written about how to cure this condition. However, there was a technical service bulletin (TSB) in July, 1988 (#88-275-5) that addresses this issue and the procedure fixes the problem. The procedure involves removing the rear wheels and having an assistant apply and release the brakes from the driver's seat. When the brakes are applied, the technician at the rear uses a flat-tip screwdriver through the inspection hole in the caliper to hold the caliper piston against the rotor while the assistant releases the brake pedal. Use the brake pedal and not the parking brake. Repeat as needed. I have also tapped the caliper with a dead-blow hammer at the same time and this causes the adjustment mechanism instead of the rear caliper to work. Always follow the instructions included in the bulletin.

If the vehicle is equipped with rear drum brakes, they should be adjusted and the self-adjuster checked for proper operation.

Wheels: Is there a way for Tom to check if the rear brakes being out of adjustment could be the cause of his low brake pedal?

Halderman: One quick and easy way to check if the rear brakes are adjusted correctly is to check the number of clicks required to apply either the hand-operated or foot-operated parking brake. It should require 4 clicks to 8 clicks to fully engage the parking brake. If it requires over 10 clicks, the rear brakes should be checked and adjusted as necessary. While it is possible that the parking brake also needs adjustment, most factory service information states that the rear brakes should be adjusted first. Then, check for proper operation before adjusting the parking brake cable. Adjusting the rear brakes should raise the brake pedal height and provide safer braking.

