

Wheels: This is the fifth of eight columns covering the operation of the dash warning lamps.

Amber ABS/TRAC Warning Lamp

The amber ABS light is used as an indicator to the driver that the antilock braking system (ABS) has detected a fault in the system. On a vehicle that is equipped with an antilock brake system (ABS), the amber ABS warning lamp will blink when the engine is first started as a self-test. When the vehicle starts to move, most antilock brake systems perform another self-test after the controller (ABS computer) has received signals from the wheel speed sensors. This self-test can be intrusive meaning that the hydraulic pump could be operated for several seconds and solenoids cycle on and off. The noise of these components may be noticed when the vehicle first starts to move. The operation of the pump may also be felt as a vibration. If the brake pedal is depressed during this self-test, the brake pedal may pulsate or drop. This is normal with ABS operation.

Wheels: What should the driver do if the amber ABS warning light comes on?

Halderman: The warning lamp indicates that the ABS controller (computer) has detected a fault and will disable the ABS function. The base brakes will still function normally. The only function that may not work is the pulsing of the wheel brakes if stopping on a slippery surface. The pulsing of the wheel brakes helps the driver maintain directional stability. Therefore, the driver should drive with caution especially if the road surface is wet or slippery.

Wheels: What could be wrong if the ABS warning lamp is on during driving and how much will it cost to fix?

Halderman: There are many problems that can cause the amber ABS warning lamp to light, including a fault with a wheel speed sensor, hydraulic control unit or controller (computer). The most common cause is due to a fault with a wheel speed sensor because the sensor itself and the wiring are exposed to movement, vibration, and road debris. A scan tool is usually needed to retrieve diagnostic trouble codes (DTCs), which can help the service technician zero in on the root cause of the problem. The cost to repair a fault ranges from less than \$100 for a simple fault that is easy to locate and correct to several thousand dollars if the entire hydraulic control unit has to be replaced. Only a few early ABS units on late 1980s and early 1990s vehicles were equipped with these very expensive integral ABS units.

Wheels: What is wrong if the “TRAC” lamp comes on when I am accelerating?

Halderman: The “TRAC” (meaning traction or traction control) amber warning lamp comes on to indicate that the ABS computer is applying the brakes and performing other functions to restore traction. Simply letting up on the accelerator should cause the “TRAC” amber light to go out as traction is again regained. If the amber ABS warning lamp is on, traction control is usually disabled.

TRAC
OFF

ABS