

Maintenance Reminder Lamp

The maintenance reminder lamp comes on to notify the driver that maintenance is due to be performed on the vehicle. This lamp is usually triggered according to the number of miles traveled.

Starting in 1981, some vehicle manufacturers were not able to prove to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that the vehicle could be driven for 50,000 miles without certain maintenance being performed on the emission control system. These vehicles must be equipped with a maintenance reminder lamp or mechanical flag that covers part of the odometer when service is required.

Wheels: What should the driver do if a “maintenance reminder” or “maintenance required” lamp or flag is displayed?

Halderman: On older model vehicles, the maintenance required lamp indicates that a service procedure should be performed and the factory service manual should be consulted regarding the work that should be done. In most cases, vehicle manufacturers specify that the oxygen sensor be checked for proper operation and replaced if needed. Another commonly specified service involves replacement of the exhaust gas recirculation (EGR) valve and related cleaning of the exhaust passages between the valve and the intake manifold.

Wheels: You stated that older vehicles use a maintenance-required lamp but many newer vehicles are equipped with a maintenance required lamp also. What is the difference and how does the driver know what to do if the lamp comes on during driving?

Halderman: Many newer vehicles are equipped with a maintenance-required lamp that flashes or lights every 5,000 miles to 7,500 miles as a reminder that service is required to be performed on the vehicle. Most of the time, this indicates that the engine oil should be changed. Some vehicles, especially General Motors Corp. vehicles, are equipped with a computer program that calculates when the oil should be changed based on the outside temperature when the engine is started, length of trip, and other factors.

TIP: I try to purchase used vehicles that are equipped with maintenance-required lamps because I believe that the owner will more likely change the engine oil regularly.

Wheels: What should the driver do if the maintenance-required lamp flashes or comes on during driving?

Halderman: The driver does not need to stop driving, but should consult the owner’s manual as to what services should be performed. The service required usually includes an oil change and routine inspection. After the service has been performed, the service technician will reset the maintenance reminder lamp and it should not come on again except as a bulb check for another 5,000 miles to 7,500 miles. The reset procedure varies and could include depressing the accelerator pedal to the floor for several seconds with the engine off or the use of a special tool. If in doubt as to what to do and how to reset the lamp, consult the dealer or a knowledgeable service technician.

