

Wheels: Ruth writes, “I drive a 1999 Cougar with manual transmission, electric windows, doors, sunroof. I am getting ready to replace the alternator for the fifth time. I have bought cheap automotive store brands and expensive dealer ones. The dealer’s lasted longer, but only by a couple months. I have had an electric system check done at my local mechanic and it showed only a bad alternator. This started 6 months after I bought it in 2001. It had factory everything on it at the time the first two alternators went out. I have changed the radio for a nicer one and have replaced the alternator twice since. My mother has the same car but an automatic and she has not had this problem. Any suggestions?”

Halderman: I really doubt that all four alternators were defective. A discharged battery could be the cause. This can be caused by a condition called a parasitic draw, which amounts to having a small drain on the battery all of the time. It often takes a few months for the battery voltage to get so low that the engine will not start. Then the battery is jump started. However, the battery may not have been fully charged when the alternator was checked. If the battery is partially discharged, the alternator test will not be valid and could show that it is not charging enough.

I suggest that you have the battery checked and replaced if necessary, because it is six years old. While the wiring could also be the cause, you gave no indication that the vehicle could have been involved in an accident, which in turn could have caused some wiring concerns. A professional knowledgeable in the electrical system and how all of the components are interconnected should be able to determine the root cause and I’ll bet it is not the alternator!

