

Wheels: We have an e-mail from Mike with a Hyundai Accent that states, “We have had this car about a month. It has 12,000 miles and runs great except on two occasions, both times when the fuel tank was just below one fourth full. First time on a country road, traveling 50 MPH, the speed suddenly dropped to 20 MPH and would go no faster. The RPMs also dropped to 700. We drove to a service station and shut it off, got gas while there, started it up, and it was fine for a week. Next incident, fuel tank one fourth full again, was driving on freeway at 70 MPH, and the speed suddenly dropped to 40 MPH, would go no faster, and the RPMs were again between 700 and 800. We pulled to the side of the road after almost causing an accident with cars coming up on us at 70 MPH. We shut the car off, tried to start it, it started hard, jerked a bit at first, but then ran fine.

I took the auto to a Hyundai dealership, they kept it for two days, could not get it to act up at all. They said it may be some type of sensor, but said they could do nothing about it since they did not know which sensor, and nothing showed out of the ordinary on their computer. They suggested keeping the fuel tank above one fourth since that seemed to be when the problem was occurring. They talked with a technician at their technical center who checked records and found no similar incident with any Accents so he had nothing to compare it to.

Help! This is my son’s car, and of course, we want him to be in a safe vehicle. Should we take it back to the dealer and insist they keep it until they find the problem or insist they take the vehicle back permanently? Please advise. Thanks for your help.”

Halderman: The engine may not be getting enough fuel to power the vehicle at highway speed. The usual cause considering the low level of fuel is contamination in the fuel tank. I have run across this situation especially if the tank is not kept above one-quarter and moisture condenses into the tank. This water (condensation) then settles in the bottom of the tank and does not affect engine operation unless the vehicle is driven with a low fuel level. When the fuel level is low, the water is drawn into the fuel system. Because water does not burn, the engine will lose power or stall. The motion of the vehicle may allow some gasoline to be drawn into the engine after it stalls. I think your car has a drain plug in the bottom of the fuel tank. I would suggest that you ask a service technician to drain the tank to make sure no water or concentrated alcohol is present in the tank. Alcohol can get into the tank because some gasoline contains alcohol. If you have used “dry gas” or other gasoline additives, these usually contain alcohol. While a little alcohol will not cause any harm, it does combine with water and separates out at the bottom of the tank. This is called “phase separation.” It is this concentrated mixture of alcohol and water that I believe to be the source of your problem.

Wheels: What should vehicle owners do to help prevent this from happening to their vehicle?

Halderman: Try not to operate your vehicle when the fuel tank is below one-quarter and do not add additives to the gasoline especially those that say they contain alcohol on the label.

