

Wheels: A reader asked the following question by e-mail. “The “check engine” light on my 1995 VW Golf came on several months ago. I took it to a dealership, where the technicians ran a diagnosis. They said it indicated a problem that might – or might not – be fixed by replacing a \$700 electrical component in the car (some sort of computerized sensor system). They said running the car with the light on would not damage it. Two other quirks accompanied the light problem: the fuel gauge indicator started responding very slowly to fill-ups and the dashboard clock started defaulting to 12:00 every so often. The technicians fixed all three problems temporarily by disconnecting the battery cables and depressing the brake pedal causing the brake lights to discharge all capacitors in the system. This resets the electrical system, they said. The fix worked for a while, but the problems returned. Faced with uncertain results from a \$700 repair, I decided to live with it.

The car is now back at the dealership with a new problem: After being outside in cold, rainy weather, the car hesitates, lurches and sometimes stalls, but only before it warms up. Then it runs fine. The technicians have replaced the plugs, the timing belt and some other worn belts, but the problem persists. They say the engine runs too rich before it warms up, but so far they haven’t been able to pinpoint the source of the problem. The car is a 5-speed with about 50,000 miles on it. Any advice will be appreciated.”

Halderman: Thanks for writing. I’ll try to make sense of your situation.

1. The diagnostic trouble code set would be helpful. A voltage problem (that would help explain some of your other problems) or the sensor itself can set a code. Also, which sensor? I would guess it is the Mass Air Flow (MAF) or Manifold Absolute Pressure (MAP) sensor.
2. Because clearing the memory of the computer (by removing the negative battery cable and depressing the brake pedal) helped, then I think a major sensor is skewed causing the computer to learn false information which then causes your drivability concerns.
3. The operating problems you are having when it is damp outside are most likely due to a fault with the secondary (high voltage) components for the ignition system (coil, spark plug wires, or distributor cap).
4. The electrical system problems are most likely due to a poor connection at a connector or ground. It is possible ALL your problems could be due to a fault in just a connector or a ground connection that is common to all these systems.

You need to find a good technician to carefully test and inspect these items. I, too, would hesitate to throw parts at the car without a sound reason.

