Wheels: An e-mail from Dave says, "I read your column on the subject of adding high-performance, low-restriction air filter and I must say it did help on my trip this past week. I have a question about my 2001 GMC truck with 6000 Vortech engine. It had 4000 miles on it when I got it as new from the dealer. After three months of driving, the problems started and are still the same, time and time again. It sounds like a diesel when it starts up and then quiets down almost all the way, but you still hear the pecking. It sounds like the noise is in the lower section of engine and no matter how far or hard you drive it, then shut it off, and start right back up, it makes the noise. I want to keep this truck if I can get it to sound and run right. Also in Tennessee on long grades of hills, while not towing anything and going 65 MPH up hill, we went down to 50 MPH. I put it in a tow mode and this made no difference. This thing, if loaded or towing will be no good at all, but around here on short hills, it goes up fine. Do you know of any problems or what this can be wrong?"

Halderman: The noise you hear is a concern with many owners of similar trucks. Go to www.pistonslap.com for additional information. According to the information I have been able to find, the piston shirt collapses about 0.001 to 0.0015 inch after the engine has been driven for a few thousand miles. The slight reduction in the diameter of the piston, which is less than the thickness of a human hair, is what is causing the noise. The noise goes away when the engine gets warm and the piston expands, reducing the clearance between the piston and the cylinder wall. The dealer is correct that it is not a durability concern, but I would not like to hear this noise either. The lack of power when climbing a steep grade is most often caused by a clogged fuel filter or a weak fuel pump. I suggest that the fuel filter be replaced first since this is a maintenance item that should be replaced about every 30,000 miles or as specified by the vehicle manufacturer.