

Car Care Articles

When your brakes are “talking” be sure to pay attention



Vehicles can sometimes be dangerously uncommunicative devices, often failing to make their owners aware of potential problems.

Unless you know how to interpret their often subtle clues they might not let you know their tires are worn, their shock absorbers lame, their transmissions failing and their engines losing efficiency. But one system, the brakes, always communicates its ills to the driver.

Sometimes they employ sign language. The simplest to read is a red warning light on the dash, although sometimes it can be as subtle as a small puddle of brake fluid. But they also communicate by feel through a soft, spongy or even overly hard brake pedal, or through rhythmic pulsations or vibrations felt through the pedal. Or by juddering or pulling to one side when the brakes are applied.

Brakes can be vocal too, emitting a range of highly audible squeals, squeaks, chirps, groans, rattles and grinding sounds. These can be dire warnings or simply pleas for maintenance, but either way prompt response is required to prevent potentially life-threatening situations caused by poor braking performance or outright failure.

A vehicle's brakes work by forcing a friction material against a disc or drum that rotates with the wheel. Hydraulic pressure applied by the brake pedal works calipers that clamp brake pads against brake discs, or shoes against the interior surface of a drum. Even normal usage generates a lot of heat, and obviously wear over time. Many of the small mechanical components involved can also wear, rust, seize or otherwise malfunction. Brake fluid can also degrade and must be changed periodically.

A new vehicle's brakes should last 60,000 to 80,000 km on average, but a number of factors can shorten this dramatically. A properly done brake job should last at least as long.

Car Care Canada recommends brakes be checked at least once a year, or every 20,000 km, to monitor wear and catch developing problems. A number of service providers offer free brake inspections, others maintenance packages that often include an oil and filter change, along with an inspection and minor adjustment of various systems, including the brakes.