

DECIPHERING YOUR VEHICLE'S DASHBOARD WARNING LIGHTS



Today's cars have more computer chips and warning lights than Apollo 11. To make it even more confusing, many of the icons for these lights are not universal. So, the word, pictogram or graphic for each system may be different on different vehicles. **CarMD** has compiled this reference to help you decipher your car's dashboard warning lights and see if it's a system that **CarMD** monitors.

| SYMBOL | SYSTEM | OVERVIEW | WHY IT'S IMPORTANT |
|---|---------------------------|---|---|
|    | Check Engine | <p>Often called the Malfunction Indicator Lamp (MIL) or Service Engine Soon light and nicknamed the "idiot light," it indicates a problem related to your vehicle's emissions system. It is tied to about 80% of the systems on your car ranging from a loose gas cap to a catalytic converter.</p> <p>This light is different from the Maintenance or Service Light!</p> | <p>At a minimum, this warning light indicates a problem that may reduce gas mileage and harm the environment. It can also signify a severe problem that may lead to expensive repairs.</p> <p><i>A flashing or blinking "check engine" light signifies a problem that is doing mechanical damage to your engine and needs immediate attention!</i></p> |
|  | ABS | <p>Indicates that a problem was detected with your car's anti-lock braking system (ABS).</p> | <p>IF the ABS system isn't working properly, your car can have an increased number of wheel lock-ups and reduced driver control of the vehicle during braking.</p> |
|  | Battery / Charging | <p>This light indicates that your vehicle isn't getting the proper charge to the battery or electrical system.</p> | <p>It can signify a problem with the battery itself as well as the alternator and can leave you stranded with a dead battery if ignored.</p> |
|   | Brake System | <p>In the U.S., this light usually says "BRAKE." In Canada, it is often only depicted as a graphic symbol. This light indicates a problem with your vehicle's brake system. It can also indicate that you left the parking brake on, so double check before you panic.</p> | <p>If this light stays on you should have your brakes checked, as ignoring this problem can cause reduced braking capacity or complete brake failure, and put you in harm's way.</p> |

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| SYMBOL | SYSTEM | OVERVIEW | WHY IT'S IMPORTANT |
|---|-------------------------------|--|---|
|  | Coolant Temperature | This light comes on when your vehicle's coolant/antifreeze mixture is higher than optimum. It often means the vehicle needs repairs ranging from an engine coolant temperature sensor to mechanical repairs to additional coolant itself. | If ignored, it can lead to overheating and expensive engine damage. |
|  | Differential Lock | Indicates the differential lock is engaged or that transmission 'wind up' may be present. | If this light stays on even after you've driven in both reverse and forward, it could indicate a transmission problem. |
|  | Electronic Power Train | The EPC (Electronic Power Control) light warns of a problem with the power train control system. The vehicle will usually go into "limp" mode, which provides you limited acceleration to protect the engine. This is enough to only get you to a repair facility. | This light indicates a problem that can reduce your traction control when driving on wet or icy roads, as well as other problems. |
|  | Glow Plug | Applies to diesel vehicles. Tells you the engine's glow plugs are warming up. | Don't start the engine until the light goes off. |
|  | Oil Pressure | One of the most important warning lights, it means your vehicle isn't getting the right amount of oil or has lost oil pressure needed for safe engine operation. | If you attempt to drive with the low oil light on, you can do major engine damage to your vehicle. |
|  | Security Alert | Alerts drivers to a range of issues that usually have something to do with the car's security/ alarm system, either factory or aftermarket. | If you ignore this light it could keep you from being able to start the car. |

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| SYMBOL | SYSTEM | OVERVIEW | WHY IT'S IMPORTANT |
|--|---|---|---|
| <i>This symbol varies from Manufacturer to Manufacturer. Please check your user's manual.</i> | Maintenance or Service Light | This light is often confused with the Check Engine/Service Engine Soon light, but is different. It is also known as the "oil reset" light and is usually tied to mileage to remind you that your car needs routine service. | Following a regularly scheduled maintenance program can help extend the life of your vehicle and minimize expensive, surprise repair bills. |
|   | SRS | This light monitors your vehicle's supplemental restraint system (SRS), which makes sure the air bags and seat belts are working properly. | This light signals that there was a fault detected, which can indicate that your vehicle's air bags and/or seat belts won't function properly if you're in a crash. |
|  | TPMS | This light is tied to the tire pressure monitoring system (TPMS) found on many newer model vehicles. It's designed to tell you when tire pressure is too high or too low, and can be a bit finicky if your weather extremes vary greatly. | If your tire pressure is too high or too low, you risk a blowout, as well as uneven wear, increased rolling resistance and fuel consumption. |
|   | Traction Control or Dynamic Traction Control | Illuminates when your vehicle's anti-skid or traction control system is in use. Please note there are various combinations for this symbol. | Heed this warning and slow down, especially on wet or icy roads. |
| | Transmission Temperature | This is a newer light designed to let you know when your transmission temperature is higher than optimum. | If left ignored, this light can indicate a problem that is doing damage to your transmission. |

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| SYMBOL | SYSTEM | OVERVIEW | WHY IT'S IMPORTANT |
|---|---|---|--|
|    | <p>Stability Control Indicator</p> | <p>Your vehicle's manufacturer may call this Automatic Stability Control (ASC), Dynamic Stability Control (DSC), Dynamic Stability and Traction Control (DSTC), Electronic Stability Control (ESC), Vehicle Dynamic Control (VDC), and many others. They all mean the same thing. When lit, it means that the vehicle is running without the stability control enhancement. A light that is constantly on or flashes may indicate a more severe problem. The vehicle may even go on "limp" mode, which provides you limited acceleration to protect the engine.</p> | <p>Stability control is a sophisticated electronically-controlled system that uses sensors in conjunction with other systems to identify when there is peripheral slip in the tires during hard cornering and responds by adjusting the throttle, brakes, and or suspension to help keep the vehicle stable.</p> |
|  | <p>Low Brake Pad Warning</p> | <p>A few vehicle manufacturers use this symbol to represent when your vehicle's brakes need service. You may also experience your brakes pulsing or squeaking when the brake pads are low. You should make an appointment to have your brakes serviced.</p> | <p>Failure to service them in time could result in further damage to your brake components and incur higher repair costs.</p> |

Important Notes: When you first turn on your vehicle, each of these warning lights should briefly light up to confirm they are working properly but should turn off while you're driving the vehicle. When any of these or other warning lights illuminate and stay "on" for a period of time, your vehicle is trying to tell you something. Just as you wouldn't ignore a health symptom, it's important to have the problem diagnosed as soon as possible. You can reference your vehicle's service manual to learn more about the specific warning lights on your car or truck, and should always seek advice and repairs from a trusted mechanic, dealership or repair shop if you have questions or concerns about any systems on your vehicle.

>> For Further Information or Support

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