



**CONSUMER'S  
GUIDE TO  
AUTOMATIC  
TRANSMISSION  
SERVICE**

**MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF STATE**  
**[www.Michigan.gov/sos](http://www.Michigan.gov/sos)**

**W**hat's wrong with it? How long will it take? How much will it cost? Will they fix it right? These are some of the questions you may ask when you take your vehicle to a repair shop for work. Your concern may be even greater if the problem involves something as complicated as an automatic transmission.

The Michigan Department of State wants you to know your rights when it comes to vehicle repairs. The department licenses and regulates motor vehicle repair shops, informs consumers of their rights and investigates complaints.

This brochure gives you some guidelines on how to proceed with an automatic transmission problem, and how to get help if you have a complaint against a repair shop.

## ■ What Is An Automatic Transmission?

The transmission is a group of parts that transmits power from a vehicle's engine to the drive axle, which in turn makes the wheels go around. If you do not use a clutch to switch gears, your vehicle has an automatic transmission. If you use a clutch, your transmission is manual.

Automatic transmissions contain oil called "transmission fluid" to cool and lubricate the mechanism. The level and quality of this fluid should be checked regularly and replaced if needed. See your owner's manual for maintenance recommendations.

## ■ What Is Normal Maintenance?

Maintenance consists primarily of checking the transmission fluid quality and level. If recommended by the vehicle manufacturer, it may also include periodic replacement of the fluid and cleaning or replacement of the transmission screen or filter. Consult your owner's manual for details.

Routine maintenance can be performed by most service stations, repair shops or auto dealerships, and does not require a specialist.

If your transmission performance seems good, the fluid is clear and red, and you have not had to add fluid, leave your transmission alone, unless the vehicle manufacturer recommends otherwise.

## ■ What Is An Inspection Service?

The inspection service offered by most transmission shops includes such procedures as:

- Fluid level check;
- Test drive;
- Manual linkage check;
- Oil pan removal;
- Band adjustment, screen cleaning or filter replacement.

The oil pan is usually removed and inspected for metal particles and friction material.

Tiny metal particles in the transmission pan do not necessarily indicate a problem.

## ■ If There Is A Problem, How Much Will It Cost?

The transmission is a complicated assembly and many different things may go wrong with it.

Some easy-to-reach small parts may cost as little as \$20 including labor. At the other extreme, it may cost hundreds of dollars to repair or rebuild a severely damaged transmission.

Your best bet is to invest in inexpensive routine maintenance and get at least two written estimates if repairs are recommended.

## ■ Is It OK To Buy An Advertised "Special"?

Many repair shops — especially those that specialize in transmission repair — advertise free or very low cost transmission "maintenance" service, free towing and other specials.

**BEWARE!** Some repair shops use these tactics to lure you in and sell you expensive repairs that you may not need.

If you are interested in an advertised transmission service:

- Find out exactly what is and isn't included.
- If the repair shop says your transmission needs major repair work, read the following section on "teardowns."

If a shop gives you a hassle or will not return your vehicle immediately when you refuse its recommended service, telephone the Department of State at the toll-free number listed on the back of this brochure.

## ■ Should I Let A Mechanic Do A "Teardown"?

Experienced, state-certified transmission mechanics can usually diagnose the extent of a problem and provide a written estimate without disassembling your transmission. But sometimes a mechanic recommends the transmission be removed and disassembled for close inspection: a teardown.

If you have had no transmission problems, yet the mechanic says a teardown is needed, insist on a written reason why. You should try to get a second opinion before authorizing a teardown.

Once you authorize a teardown, you will have to pay for it, plus reassembly costs, if you decide not to have repairs made.

**BEFORE you authorize a teardown**, ask the repair shop to provide a written maximum price for fixing the transmission in case it does need repairs. If the mechanic says he or she cannot do this before doing a teardown, **TAKE YOUR VEHICLE TO A SHOP THAT CAN.**

## ■ How Do I Choose A Repair Shop?

Your regular auto mechanic, family, friends, neighbors and co-workers may be able to recommend a competent transmission specialist — and tell you which shops to avoid.

The best advice is to get a couple of opinions from different shops on a transmission problem.

Always get a written estimate of repairs before leaving your vehicle at a repair shop; this is your right under Michigan law.

## ■ Are Rebuilt Transmissions OK?

There is nothing wrong with having a rebuilt transmission put into your vehicle — but only if you need one. Having your transmission repaired may be less expensive.

## ■ What If I Authorize Repairs?

Under Michigan law a repair shop is required to give you a written estimate for fixing the transmission.

If repairs are done, you are entitled by law to inspect and receive parts that were removed from your vehicle and replaced. Always ask for and take these parts. For some parts the shop may require you to pay a fee known as a “core charge.” If the replaced parts are not needed to settle a complaint, returning them to the repair shop entitles you to a refund of the core charge.

Michigan law also entitles you to an itemized invoice showing all costs for parts and labor. Getting replaced parts and a final bill can be very helpful if you have a complaint against the repair shop.

## ■ What If I Have A Complaint?

If you cannot settle your dispute directly with the repair shop, you may file a complaint with the Department of State.

If you believe you were charged for repairs that were not done or you were told that you needed repairs which you later found were not needed (even if you didn't have the repairs done), contact the Department of State immediately.

### **Additional brochures published by the Department of State:**

*Auto Repair Rights & Repair Tips*

*Consumer's Automotive Information &  
Complaint Kit*

*Consumer's Guide to  
Brake Repair Service*

*Consumer's Guide to Buying a Vehicle  
from a Dealership*

*Consumer's Guide to Collision Repairs*

*Consumer's Guide to Engine  
Replacement*

*Consumer's Guide to Vehicle Leasing*

*Consumer's Guide to Vehicle Restoration*

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