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What's with those lights?

Not too long ago, you hopped in your car and turned the key. A couple of lights flashed for a second, the motor started and you were ready to go. Not true anymore. A modern vehicle has bells and whistles and flashing lights galore—most of which briefly light up or sound off, as you settle in and start the engine. So what do they all mean, and how much attention should you pay to them?

- **Ding, ding, ding or beep beep beep** – You have just left the car, the door is still open and the car is talking to you. Most likely you have left your keys in the ignition or your lights are still on.

- **Ding ding ding again**— You're in the car and you've started the motor. For the next few seconds you hear the ding. Most likely that's because you haven't fastened your seatbelt. So buckle up right away.

- **Seat belt light**— Pretty obvious. Fasten your seat belt for your own good.

- **Airbag light**— Usually orange in colour, it flashes briefly as you start the car and often shows what looks like a person holding a beach ball. If this light comes on when you are driving, take your car to your dealer as soon as possible. Your airbag system might not be working properly.

- **Brake light**— Usually red, it often shows a little round disk or the word "brake". It indicates that your handbrake is on and that you should release it before driving away. If the light does not go out after you have released the handbrake, it could indicate low brake fluid or a malfunction in the brake system. Call your dealer. Do not drive the car until this problem is fixed.

- **Temperature light**— Often looks like a thermometer. If it goes on when you are driving it

means your engine might be overheating. This can be caused by not enough coolant (antifreeze and water) or not enough oil. Stop the car to let it cool down, then add coolant and/or oil if necessary, or call for help.

- **High beam light**— Usually blue. Indicates that your high beams are on, which you should always be aware of.

- **Engine check light**— This one is a little tricky as its function varies from car to car. But basically, it is part of your engine diagnostic system and is indicating that something is malfunctioning. This problem could be minor, like a fuel cap not properly attached, or something potentially serious. Call your dealer.

- **Alternator/Battery**— You can drive with a dead battery and a good alternator or a good battery and a dead alternator. But not for very long. If this light comes on you have an electrical malfunction. It might be as simple as a loose engine belt, or something more serious. Attend to it quickly.

- **Oil Light**— This is one of the most important lights. It indicates that oil pressure is too low. If it goes on while driving, stop the engine as soon as possible and check the oil level. If the light stays on when the engine oil level is normal, stop and call your dealer for service.

- **ABS /Anti-Skid Light** – This will normally flash when your ABS system is in use and remain off the rest of the time. If this light comes on during normal driving, your brake system might be malfunctioning and you should see your dealer as soon as possible. Note: In some vehicles you can turn off the ABS or traction control system, and the light remains on all the time.

—News Canada

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