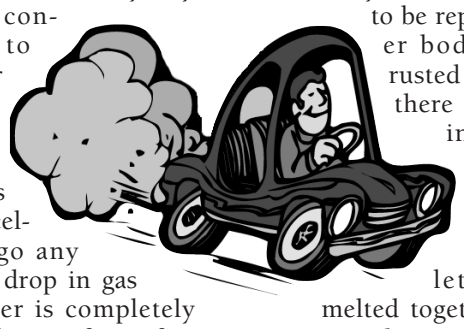
# How to maintain the life of your car's catalytic converter

Closely resembling a muffler in appearance, the catalytic converter is designed to change three harmful compounds in vehicle exhaust into harmless compounds. Located in the exhaust system with an outer shell made from stainless steel, catalytic converters have been standard equipment in many automobiles since the mid-1970s.

It is the job of the catalytic converter to take the hydrocarbons, carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxides produced by the vehicle exhaust and convert them to carbon dioxide, nitrogen, oxygen and water. Even though emissions are reduced by the catalytic converter, they are not eliminated altogether. After the engine exhaust gases have passed through the catalytic converter, they go through the muffler.

The catalytic converter usually lasts as long as the vehicle and rarely becomes clogged or plugged during its lifetime. That's not to say that a catalytic converter can never fail. In fact, there is a way one can fail: It can become clogged. If you suspect there is a problem, there is no actual way to see a clog in the converter. More often than not, the only way to tell if the catalytic converter is clogged is to remove it and check for any change in the engine's performance. A sure sign that you have a clogged converter is when you press the accelerator and you don't go any faster and experience a drop in gas mileage. If the converter is completely clogged, the engine will quit after a few minutes because of the increased exhaust backpressure.



Overuse of certain fuel additives and leaded gasoline can reduce the life of the catalytic converter. Other reasons for catalytic converter failure are bad exhaust valves and fouled plugs that cause unburned fuel to overheat the converter.

The catalytic converter may also need to be replaced if the converter body or end tubs are rusted out or broken or if there are bits of substrate in other parts of the exhaust system. If a pellitized converter does not rattle, it could mean the pellets fell out or they melted together. If a monolithic converter rattles, it could mean the substrate has separated.

There are some maintenance tips that can help you prolong the life of your catalytic converter. If your vehicle begins to ride rough, emits black smoke from the tailpipe of the service engine or the check engine light comes on, have it checked right away by a qualified mechanic. This is especially important if the engine lights are flashing. Other symptoms of converter trouble are the vehicle bucking or hesitating, the engine temperature increasing, poor performance or the vehicle failing an emissions test. Ignoring these problems could lead to the converter becoming damaged and needing to be replaced.

The catalytic converter may be the most well-known part of a vehicle. It plays a very important role in the well-being of your vehicle and the environment. Maintain it well.

—*By Ronda Addy*, special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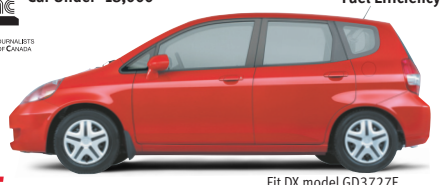

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