

Dashboard warning lights

Easy · 10 min to read; 5 min with your manual · Free to check; repairs vary

A red oil light means pull over and shut the engine off. A temperature light means the engine is overheating. A battery light means drive straight to a shop with everything electrical off. A steady check-engine light means book a shop soon; a flashing one means go now.

YOU'LL NEED

- ☐ Your owner's manual (or the maker's website), for your car's exact symbols
- ☐ Your roadside assistance number, if you have one

WHAT TO KNOW

- 1 **Learn your car's symbols now, while nothing is wrong.** AAA's advice is to read your owner's manual and know what each warning light means. No warning light should be ignored.
- 2 **Oil pressure light (an oil can, or the word OIL): of all the lights, this one means the greatest risk of serious engine damage.** If it comes on and stays on, pull off the road at the first safe place, shut off the engine and call for help.
- 3 **Temperature light (a thermometer, or TEMP): the engine is hotter than it should be, and major damage is likely unless it cools quickly.** If you see signs of a coolant leak, pull off safely, shut off the engine and call for help. Be careful opening the hood if there's steam, and never remove the radiator cap when the engine is hot.
- 4 **Battery or charging light (a battery, or ALT or GEN): the alternator isn't powering the car.** Turn off the radio, heat and air conditioning, then drive straight to a repair shop.
- 5 **Check engine light, steady: there's a problem affecting the car's emissions.** Make a shop appointment soon. First, check the gas cap. A loose or damaged cap can turn the light on, and in most cases retightening it fixes the problem.
- 6 **Check engine light, flashing: a serious problem is happening right now that can overheat and ruin the catalytic converter, or even start a fire.** Drive to a repair shop right away. If the car runs badly or smells hot, pull over and call for a tow.
- 7 **Tire pressure light: one or more tires is significantly low.** Check all four with a gauge, using the pressure on the driver's door label. See The maintenance schedule.

Watch out Ignoring a flashing check engine light can start a fire, destroy the catalytic converter and lead to repairs that can easily top \$1,000. A red light is a stop-soon light. Don't push it to get home.

DAD NOTE Red means stop, and I mean it. A \$40 tow beats a \$4,000 engine every single time.

Full lesson: aptkeys.com/your-place/car-ownership/dashboard-warning-lights/

Checked October 3, 2026. Sources: AAA; North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; Federal Trade Commission.