

Car Maintenance 101: Diagnosing Your Suspension Problems (Part I)



Your car's suspension is one of the most important auto systems installed in your vehicle. It's the part of your ride that keeps your vehicle's auto body connected to your wheels. Aside from keeping your vehicle in one piece, the suspension also has the vital job of dampening the up and down movement created by your vehicle's leaf springs each time your ride passes through road irregularities. It basically controls the involuntary, bouncing movement naturally created by your car, to make your travels a lot more comfortable and stable.

Each time you travel, your suspension system undergoes road abuse brought by adverse road conditions and even "extreme driving". Ever had to slam on your brakes extremely hard because the driver in front of you stopped so suddenly? Remember the hard jolt that shook both you and your passengers? Now imagine the amount of force the suspension system had to withstand when you hit the brakes without warning.

It's the same thing with traveling off-road. Because your vehicle bounces more, your car's suspension system has a tougher time trying to dampen the undulation generated by your leaf spring.

While your vehicle's suspension system is designed to be extremely hardwearing, expect tough road abuse to eventually wear out some of your suspension parts. In some severe instances, the suspension system might even break—particularly if you don't address your suspension troubles as soon as possible.

To avoid a complete auto breakdown, troubleshoot your suspension the moment you notice something different with how your vehicle travels—excess bouncing, bottoming out, etc.

Note to Reader: To save more money, I recommend habitually checking your suspension for signs of problems—this way, you can easily address minor suspension issues before they become full-blown suspension problems that are sure to drain your bank account. (Not to mention, cause you countless migraines.) In my previous post on checking your vehicle’s exterior, I gave one tip on how you can check the state of your suspension, and that’s by “bouncing” your car. You’ll stand over at one end of your car, your assistant will stand at the other. At the same time, apply pressure on your vehicle’s trunk and hood. This should let your car bounce a little. It shouldn’t bounce too much. If it continues bouncing even after a while, then that’s a sign of suspension troubles. Take your car to a reputable mechanic as soon as you can.

Check the following symptoms to find which one applies to your car, and discover the possible reasons behind your suspension woes.

Note to Reader 2: A good tip I received from one of my friends goes: “check the visible connections of your suspension. Your suspension problems might just be caused by loose or damaged connections.” Before taking your car to the garage and having multiple parts replaced, check what you can and suggest to your mechanic what you think the problem might be. Further inspection by your mechanic should tell you if your problem is as simple as loose bolts or as complicated as having to replace your entire axle assembly.

If One or All of Your Wheels Shimmy As You Drive...

“Wheel shimmy” is one of the terms we use to describe the back and forth movement created by your wheels as you drive—and no, this is not a good sign or a common thing. I’ve had so many friends tell me that it’s normal for your wheels to shimmy, and I’ll have to disagree. When your wheels rapidly go from one side to the other, even when you’re driving on even roads, then you could have either one of the following:

- **at least one rapidly deflating tire**—at which point, you’ll have to inflate that tire as soon as possible. if you have one soft tire, it also pays to check the rest of your tires for signs of damage or deflation. Check each of your tire’s inflation.
- **your wheels are no longer aligned.** If your wheels are no longer aligned, take your car to a nearby garage for wheel realignment.
- **it’s a steering problem.** If your wheels and tires are fine (no signs of uneven or excessive wear), and you notice difficulties steering, then the culprits might just be malfunctioning or damaged steering components.

- **excessive and/or uneven wear in your tires.** Check your tires for signs of excessive wear and damage. If you notice uneven wear on your tires, for example: the inner side of all your tires is starting to wear out faster than their outer, more visible sides, then that's a sign of a problem with wheel alignment or wheel imbalance.
- **unbalanced wheels**. Take your car to the garage to have your wheels restored to their original position.

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