

CONSUMER'S EDGE

CONSUMER PROTECTION DIVISION, MARYLAND OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

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KEEP AUTO REPAIR FROM BEING A WRENCHING EXPERIENCE

A Baltimore man took his car for repairs after it failed its emissions test. The shop replaced some valves and a hose for \$149 and said the car would pass. It didn't. When the man brought the car back, the shop said the carburetor would have to be rebuilt for \$566. The consumer took his car to another mechanic who said the carburetor only needed a minor adjustment. He fixed the car and it passed inspection.

A Takoma Park man took his car into a repair shop for some work, which the mechanic told him would cost around \$680. He did not ask for a written estimate. When he picked up his car the bill was \$971. Because he had nothing in writing, the shop owner told him he had to pay the full amount.



Car repair problems are a major source of consumer complaints. Repairs can be very costly and no one likes to waste money on shoddy workmanship, a misdiagnosis, bad estimates or unauthorized repairs. Your best insurance against these kinds of problems is to find a reputable repair shop. Look for a repair shop before you need one, so you don't have to rush into a decision when an emergency arises.

Here are some guidelines:

1. Get recommendations. Talk to friends and family who trust their mechanic. Ask your auto insurance agent, auto parts salesperson, or other business people you know.
2. Check the repair shop's complaint records with the Consumer Protection Division and the Better Business Bureau. The shop you select should have few complaints registered against it and a good track record of resolving those complaints.
3. Look for a mechanic with experience working on the same automobile model and make as yours.
4. Seek out a mechanic with good credentials, updated knowledge and skill. Some shops display ASE (Automotive Service Excellence) certification, which indicates the mechanic has met basic standards in a specific technical area. You can also check for shops that participate in the AAA (American Automobile Association) auto service program. But be careful. A mechanic who has passed an ASE test or received other certification may not necessarily be outstanding or even honest.
5. Interview mechanics. Are they willing to answer your questions? Do they convey a positive, professional image?
6. Ask the shop for the names of customer references. Then call those references.
7. Look for a shop with a clean and well-maintained repair area.

Getting an Estimate and Authorizing Repair

For any major car repair, you should always get a second opinion. Then get repair cost estimates from a couple of other shops. Some facilities charge for estimates, so ask if there will be a fee.



Remember:

- Under state law, you're entitled to a written estimate for all repairs costing more than \$50 and you can't be charged more than 10% over the written estimate without your consent. If the mechanic finds that the repair will cost more than 10% above the estimate, or that additional repairs are needed, the shop must contact you to get your authorization.
- You also can't be charged for repairs you didn't authorize. Before signing a repair order, read it carefully. Ask for clarification of any item you don't understand.
- You have a right to keep your replaced parts. Tell the shop ahead of time that you want them returned. Keep them until you are confident the repairs made were necessary and performed properly. If you encounter any difficulty, these parts may assist you in resolving your problem. However: you may not want your part returned if the shop says you will have to pay a "core charge." This fee is charged when you receive a rebuilt part for your car, but do not surrender your part to be traded back to the rebuilder.

When the Work Is Completed

The invoice you receive should list all work performed, all parts supplied and any surcharges. Any used, rebuilt or reconditioned parts must be identified. Keep your invoice as a record. It may be useful if you need to return to the shop because the repairs weren't satisfactory.

Sometimes consumers find that the shop charged them much more than the estimate, and the two parties disagree over whether the consumer authorized the higher cost. If this happens, the shop has the right to hold your car until you pay. In that case, you have two choices. You can pay the bill in full, noting that the amount is in dispute, and take your car home. You may then file a complaint with the Consumer Protection Division or with District Court to try to get the disputed portion of the bill refunded to you.

The other choice is to leave the car at the shop and petition the District Court to issue a writ of replevin. However, this is a costly and time-consuming process. You will have to post a bond for twice the disputed amount before the court orders the shop to release your car. You will then get a hearing in District Court to determine who is responsible for the disputed portion of the bill.

Repair Pricing

Most auto repair shops set their fees for repairs by using a flat rate manual, which lists the cost of a specific repair for your make, model and year of car. However, it doesn't hurt to try to negotiate a lower price. Many shops will match a competitor's estimate.

Auto repair shops often advertise special prices for services such as tune-ups or alignments. Call and ask if the advertised price is what you will be charged. A shop advertising a service for \$49.95 may offer that price only for cars with four-cylinder engines, but charge more for cars with six-cylinder engines.

Always ask if any price, including an advertised price, includes all fees. Some shops charge "shop fees" or "environmental impact fees" that can add a few dollars or a percentage of the total cost to the final bill.

Taking the time to find an auto repair shop with a good reputation, getting second opinions, asking for written estimates, and asking ahead of time about additional fees can help you have a satisfactory car repair experience.

Consumers who need help resolving a dispute through mediation with an auto repair facility can call the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division.

HOW TO CONTACT US

Consumer Protection Division

200 St. Paul Place, 16th Fl., Baltimore, MD 21202

- **General Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-8662
Toll-free: 1-888-743-0023 TDD: 410-576-6372
9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday
www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/CPD/
- **Health Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-1840
Toll-free: 1-877-261-8807 TDD: 410-576-6372
9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
www.marylandcares.org
- **For information on branch offices** in Largo, Salisbury, Hagerstown, and a full list of offices across Maryland, visit:
www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/contactus.aspx

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