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PRINTABLE SAFETY GUIDE

Dashboard warning lights and messages: the first 60 seconds

What each light is telling you, which ones mean stop now, and what to check before you call anyone. Includes the driver-assistance messages on Toyota, Honda, Subaru and Ford.

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Free to print and share unchanged. Online version with model-specific detail: thefixcar.com/symptoms/

1 How to read a warning

Every light comes on for a second or two when you switch the ignition on. That is a bulb check. A light that stays on, or comes on while you drive, is a message, and the colour tells you how urgent it is.

COLOUR	MEANING	WHAT TO DO
RED	A condition that can damage the engine or make the car unsafe: oil pressure, coolant temperature, brake system, charging system, open door while moving.	Stop as soon as it is safe.
AMBER / YELLOW	A fault or a reduced function: engine management, ABS, tyre pressure, traction control, driver-assistance systems.	Drive carefully, fix soon.
GREEN / BLUE	Information: headlamps on, high beam, indicators, cruise control engaged, eco mode.	Nothing to do.

The 60-second rule

- 1 Note the colour and the symbol.** Do not reach for the phone or the manual while the car is moving.
- 2 Red: hazards on, find a safe place, stop, switch off.** A parking bay or a wide shoulder beats the lane you are in; a few hundred metres at low speed is acceptable if the engine is still running normally.
- 3 Amber: keep driving normally and decide at the next stop.** If the car also pulls, vibrates, loses power or the pedal feels different, treat it as red.
- 4 Two or more lights at once usually share one cause.** ABS, power steering and traction warnings together point to low battery voltage; collision warning, cruise and lane keeping together point to one blocked camera.

Three things that are not emergencies

- **A light that flashes briefly on a cold start** and goes out within a few seconds of the engine running: the system has passed its self-test.
- **A tyre pressure light on the first cold morning of autumn.** Pressure drops with temperature; check all four tyres and inflate to the figure on the door placard.
- **A driver-assistance "unavailable" message in heavy rain, snow, fog or low sun.** The camera cannot see. It comes back on its own when the view clears.

2 Red lights: stop

These four lights describe something that is happening right now. Driving on to the next town is how a small repair becomes an engine.

Oil pressure (oil can)

Oil pressure has dropped below the minimum. Causes: low oil level, failed oil pump, worn engine, faulty switch.

Do: stop the engine as soon as it is safe. Check the level; top up if low. If the level is correct and the light stays on, do not restart. An engine run without oil pressure can be destroyed in under a minute.

Coolant temperature (thermometer)

The engine is overheating: low coolant, stuck thermostat, fan not running, failed water pump.

Do: air-conditioning off, heater on full, and stop if the light stays on. Never open the cap while hot. Minutes of overheating can warp an aluminium cylinder head.

Brake system (circle with "!" or BRAKE)

Parking brake applied, brake fluid at the MIN mark, or worn pads on cars with wear sensors.

Do: release the parking brake. If the light stays on, check the fluid level when parked. A soft, long or sinking pedal means do not drive. Together with the ABS light, braking may be seriously reduced: stop and have the car recovered.

Battery / charging (battery symbol)

The alternator is not charging. The car is running on the battery alone: usually 15 to 30 minutes, less with lights, wipers and heating on.

Do: switch off every accessory you can and drive straight to a workshop, or stop. On modern cars power steering and brake assistance fade before the engine dies. Look for a missing or shredded belt; a broken belt usually also stops the water pump.

Red lights you may also see

LIGHT	MEANING	ACTION
Door / bonnet / boot open	A latch is not fully closed.	Stop and close it. A bonnet that lifts at speed blocks the windscreen.
Seat belt	An occupied seat is unbuckled (some cars count luggage on the seat).	Buckle up or move the bag.
Power steering (steering wheel, red)	Steering assistance has failed or is failing.	The car still steers, but heavily. Stop where safe; check battery voltage and the belt.
Transmission temperature	Automatic transmission fluid is too hot (towing, hill climbs, low fluid).	Stop, idle in Park or Neutral until the light goes out, then drive gently.

3 Amber lights: drive, but fix

Amber means a system has switched itself off or stored a fault. The car remains drivable; what you lose is a safety margin, and the repair bill grows the longer the light is ignored.

Check engine (engine outline)

The engine computer has stored a fault code: misfire, mixture, oxygen sensor, evaporative leak, including a loose fuel cap.

Steady: tighten the fuel cap, then have the code read (any 1996+ car has the OBD-II socket under the dash). **Flashing:** a misfire severe enough to damage the catalytic converter. Slow down, reduce load, have it checked today.

ABS

The anti-lock system has a fault: wheel speed sensor, fuse, low voltage, modulator.

Do: normal braking still works, but wheels can lock under hard braking and stability control is usually off too. Brake earlier and more gently; have the codes read. The sensor fault is reported by wheel position.

Tyre pressure (TPMS)

One or more tyres is well below the placard pressure, or the system has a fault.

Do: check all four with a gauge and inflate; the light clears after a few minutes of driving. A light that **flashes for about a minute** after start-up and then stays on is a system fault, usually a sensor battery. The spare is not monitored.

Traction / stability control (car with skid marks)

Flashing while driving: the system is working, the road is slippery. **Steady:** the system is off or has a fault, often alongside ABS.

Do: if flashing, ease off. If steady, check whether it was switched off by the button; otherwise have it checked with the ABS.

Airbag / SRS

The restraint system has stored a fault: pretensioner, a connector under a seat, occupant sensor, module.

Do: the airbags may not deploy in a crash while the light is on. Have the codes read. Not a do-it-yourself repair.

Low fuel, washer fluid, DEF (diesel)

Service reminders.

Do: top up. On diesels, letting the DEF (AdBlue) tank run empty prevents the engine from restarting; the countdown on the display is real.

Reading the code yourself

A basic OBD-II reader costs about the price of a tank of fuel and shows the stored code (for example P0301, cylinder 1 misfire). Knowing the code before you phone a workshop saves diagnostic time and keeps the conversation specific. Driver-assistance and airbag modules usually need a dealer-level or manufacturer-capable tool.

4 Driver-assistance messages, by brand

These systems depend on a camera behind the windscreen and a radar behind the badge. When one cannot see, or has moved, the car says so in its own words.

BRAND	MESSAGE ON THE DISPLAY	WHAT IT MEANS	FIRST STEP
Toyota / Lexus	"Pre-Collision System Unavailable" + "Clean Sensor"	Temporary: the radar behind the emblem or the camera zone is dirty, iced, or blinded by rain, fog or low sun.	Clean the emblem, grille and glass; restart; drive a few minutes.
Toyota / Lexus	"Pre-Collision System Malfunction"	A stored fault: camera moved by a windscreen replacement, bumper impact, weak 12 V battery, module fault.	Check recent work; test the battery; have codes read.
Honda / Acura	"Collision Mitigation Braking System Problem. See Your Dealer"; amber CMBS indicator, often with ACC and RDM	Fault stored in the radar, camera, brake switch or engine module. On several 2018 to 2020 models a software update is the published fix.	Restart once; if it returns, codes before anyone orders a radar.
Honda / Acura	"Radar Obstructed" or amber indicator alone	Temporary shut-off: snow, mud or a sticker over the front emblem.	Clean and re-check.
Subaru	"EyeSight Disabled" with "No Camera View", "Temp Range" or "Check Manual" (white)	Temporary stop: windscreen in front of the twin cameras obscured, cabin too hot or cold, steep incline, repeated hard braking.	Clean the glass in front of both cameras; wait; it restarts itself.
Subaru	"EyeSight Off Check Manual" (yellow, steady or flashing)	Malfunction or camera misalignment; codes stored in the stereo camera.	Stop safely, restart once; if it stays, dealer inspection with codes read first.
Ford / Lincoln	"Pre-Collision Assist Not Available" + "Sensor Blocked"	Camera behind the mirror or radar in the grille cannot see: dirt, salt, snow, heavy spray.	Clean the glass and grille surface; wait several minutes or for the weather.
Ford / Lincoln	"Pre-Collision Assist Not Available" alone, or "Front Camera Fault"	Stored codes in the image processing module; on several models a software update or an alignment procedure is published.	Codes read before anything is cleared.

While the message is on: collision warning and automatic braking are off, and adaptive cruise and lane keeping usually go with them. Steering and brakes are unaffected unless a brake warning appears too. Leave more following distance. Stop if braking feels different, the car brakes by itself, or a red light joins the message.

5 What to check before the dealer

Most driver-assistance warnings from a clean, undamaged car clear at step 3. Work through the list in order and note what you find; the notes shorten the diagnosis if the message stays.

1. **Clean the windscreen in the camera zone,** inside and out: the patch at the top centre, in front of or beside the mirror. Wiper smear and road film there are the most common cause.
2. **Clean the radar area:** the front emblem, the lower grille opening or the painted bumper panel named in the manual. Wipe; do not aim a pressure washer at it.
3. **Restart and drive** a few minutes above about 40 km/h (25 mph) on a clear road. Most systems finish their self-check only when moving.
4. **Look for anything in the radar's path:** a thick licence-plate frame, an added badge, a bumper sticker, a light bar, a bike or ski rack, a snow plough mount.
5. **Recall recent work:** windscreen replaced, bumper repaired, battery disconnected, jump start, new accessories. Each can require a calibration or a module reset.
6. **Check the 12 V battery:** below about 12.4 V at rest, or more than four years old, it can set false faults in several modules at once.
7. **Search technical service bulletins** for the model and year; several manufacturers have published camera and radar software updates for exactly this message.
8. **Have the fault codes read** with a manufacturer-capable tool. The codes live in the camera and radar modules, which a basic reader cannot reach.



The radar looks out through the badge or the grille. Snow, mud, ice and insects here are the usual cause of an "unavailable" message.



The camera sits behind the glass next to the mirror. Clean that patch inside and out before anything else.

After a windscreen replacement

A camera moved by a fraction of a degree aims at the wrong place. Most cars with a windscreen camera need a static target calibration after the glass is replaced, some also need a drive cycle, and the system can show no fault code in between. Ask the glass shop whether calibration was included and keep the printout. The same applies to bumper work on cars with front or corner radars.

6 When to stop driving

- ☐ A red light stays on after a restart, or comes on while driving.
- ☐ The brake pedal feels soft, long, or sinks under steady pressure.
- ☐ The brake light and the ABS light are on together.
- ☐ The temperature gauge is in the red or the coolant light is on.
- ☐ The oil pressure light is on with the engine running.
- ☐ The battery light is on and the headlights are dimming, or other warnings are joining it.
- ☐ Any burning smell, smoke, or a strong fuel smell. Get everyone out and away from the car.
- ☐ A driver-assistance message is accompanied by the car braking on its own or a change in pedal feel.
- ☐ The windscreen cannot be cleared, or the headlights or brake lights do not work after dark.
- ☐ You do not know what the light means and cannot find out safely. Pull over and read the manual.

Sources and further reading

- Battery light on while driving: causes, checks and how long the car will run. thefixcar.com/symptoms/battery-light-came-on-while-driving/
- Pre-Collision System Malfunction: causes, sensor checks and when to recalibrate. thefixcar.com/symptoms/pre-collision-system-malfunction/
- Pre-Collision System Unavailable and the Clean Sensor message. thefixcar.com/symptoms/pre-collision-system-unavailable-clean-sensor/
- Honda "Collision Mitigation Braking System Problem": service bulletins, models and codes. thefixcar.com/symptoms/honda-collision-mitigation-braking-system-problem/
- Subaru "EyeSight Disabled" and "EyeSight Off Check Manual". thefixcar.com/symptoms/subaru-eyesight-disabled/
- Ford "Pre-Collision Assist Not Available": sensor blocked, bulletins and recall. thefixcar.com/symptoms/ford-pre-collision-assist-not-available/
- ADAS calibration after windscreen replacement. thefixcar.com/safety/adas-calibration-after-windshield-replacement/
- Manufacturer owner's manuals (Toyota, Honda, Subaru, Ford) and published technical service bulletins via the NHTSA database, [safercar.gov](https://www.safercar.gov).
- U.S. FMVSS No. 127, Automatic Emergency Braking Systems for Light Vehicles (final rule, 2024).

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