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Automakers, believe it or not, are always intent on making sure the cars they produce and sell, operate as intended, and do so safely for vehicle owners. When mechanical problems persist, it's not uncommon to hear news about a manufacturer issuing a recall, for example. When a particular vehicle model accumulates enough complaints or warranty claims, it's time for the automaker to announce warnings and offer solutions. They do this by issuing recalls and technical service bulletins. So, what's the difference? If the vehicle in question has a record of or the potential for safety hazards, the automaker will issue a recall. There is still some debate and a gray area as to what officially constitutes a safety defect. But typically, it's any flaw that puts the vehicle occupants at risk or in danger, in any way. Recalls are issued directly to vehicle owners by email, mail, or even calls from the local dealership. And the costs of repairs are covered by the dealership that, in turn, is made whole by the automaker. According to CarComplaints, a Technical Service Bulletin (TSB) is a set of recommended repair procedures, issued by an automaker, on how to address a specific problem, usually considered to be less severe. For mechanical issues that arise that don't qualify as dangerous, automakers still need to offer recommended solutions and repair steps. For example, the 2019 Nissan Rogue has a TSB discussing potential airflow constriction from the vents if snow builds up around the blower motor. It's an issue that might not necessarily be risky to the occupants, but it's a common problem for those with Nissan Rogue SUVs who encounter significant snow. Unlike recalls, TSB repair costs are often a burden of the vehicle owner, and automakers aren't required to notify owners of TSB related issues. Finding a current or historical roster of TSBs can help consumers make better buying decisions and avoid problematic models. It can also be an indication of manufacturing defects ongoing. Manufacturers might categorize the issue as a component or something electrical. And again, the problems can sometimes be as minor as a loose-fitting set of visors or a crackly speaker problem. But even some of the most seemingly minor issues can lead to more comprehensive mechanical failures and even more costly repairs. Technical service bulletins exist so consumers can make decisions to buy a vehicle with complete knowledge of the potential for frequent hiccups. But if no one is required to notify you of their existence, how would you ever know about a vehicle's TSBs? TSBs are not at all consumer-friendly. In fact, they're usually straight forward statements, listing parts, and part numbers and the tools required for repairs. The summaries, which are now required to be documented with the NHTSA, tend to be a little more understandable. It took a lawsuit in 2016 when the Center for Auto Safety (CAS) sued the Department of Transportation, over transparency and notification concerns at the consumer level. Other sources exist, including CarComplaints.com, but don't necessarily capture all available posted TSBs. Most consumers have dealt with a recall or two over their lifetimes of car ownership. But the technical service bulletins might not be as common or top of mind. As a win for car buyers everywhere, automakers are at least required to notify the NHTSA of technical service bulletins as they arise. So before you buy your next set of wheels, don't just look for vehicle history or recall information. Consider examining the TSB alerts, as well. It could save you big in the long run. Related What to Consider When Buying a Car That Might Need Recall Work How these simple documents can unlock information about your car. Your car is a complex machine that will develop clunks, bangs, and strange smells over time. Car problems are simply inevitable. And while it may not feel like it, automakers are keeping a watchful eye on problem trends in their fleet. When enough complaints or warranty claims pile up, automakers need to come up with a solution. If the problem is safety-related they're supposed to issue a recall. But for things like squeaks and busted side mirrors, they need a way to tell their dealerships how to repair them. A Technical Service Bulletin (TSB) is a set of recommended repair procedures, issued by an automaker, on how to address a specific problem. Think of it like those instructions that come with Ikea furniture, except more specific and without any allen wrenches. How Does a TSB Differ from a Recall? A TSB differs from a recall in multiple ways: Recalls are only issued when there's a safety defect. There's debate over what qualifies as a safety defect, but more often than not if occupants in the car are put at risk there will be a recall. A TSB, meanwhile, can be about anything. Like that annoying sun visor that you had to duct tape to the ceiling to stop it from falling down after every pot hole. If your car is out of warranty, you'll probably pay full price for TSB repairs. By law, automakers need to reimburse their dealerships for the costs incurred during a recall. The same can't be said about TSBs. In addition, even some in-warranty repairs outlined by a TSB have time limits. Unlike recalls, automakers aren't required to notify owners about TSBs. TSBs are sent to dealerships and logged with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), but automakers are under no obligation to notify owners. That leads us to the next problem... How Can I See the TSBs Issued For My Car? An informed consumer is able to make smarter decisions about their car. So you'd think technical service bulletins would be easy to access. After all, if your power window switch isn't working wouldn't it be nice to know if the automaker already knows about it and has a fix? Unfortunately for the longest time it just wasn't that simple. TSBs are straight forward documents — they have a subject, a list of affected vehicles, part numbers, tool listing and repair procedures. But they weren't free to consumers. All we got were some lousy summaries. When an automaker issues a TSB to its dealers, they have to notify the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). However, NHTSA only stored a tiny bit of cryptic information about the TSB. Take a look at one TSB summary for the 2011 Honda CR-V under ENGINE: TSB #AER12040B NHTSA ID #10043934 Summary: AMERICAN HONDA: SEE DOCUMENT SEARCH BUTTON FOR OWNER LETTER. HEAD COVER GASKET LEAKS. TO FULLY UNDERSTAND THE CAUSE OF THIS OCCURRENCE, AHM WOULD LIKE TO COLLECT PERTINENT INFORMATION AND/OR INSPECT THE VEHICLE PRIOR TO ATTEMPTING REP OK, a few things: Huh? Who is AHM and what information is he collecting? They couldn't even be bothered to spell 'document' right? OK, there is a known problem with head cover gasket leaks, but now what? A Huge Win For Car Owners On February 9th, 2016, the Center for Auto Safety (CAS) sued the Department of Transportation over violations of federal law for auto safety. "Today the Center for Auto Safety filed suit against DOT Secretary Foxx to force the Secretary to do what the law so clearly requires. This is yet another example of where voluntary and cooperative action by the auto industry so praised by Secretary Foxx fails." - CAS Executive Director Clarence Ditlow "The Department of Transportation claimed posting the full TSBs is a copyright violation, but that's not what Johnny Law says. The 2012 Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) says the Secretary of Transportation is supposed to: "make available on a publicly accessible Internet website, a true or representative copy of each communication to the manufacturer's dealers or to owners or purchasers of a motor vehicle or replacement equipment produced by the manufacturer about a defect or noncompliance with a motor vehicle safety standard prescribed under this chapter in a vehicle or equipment that is sold or serviced." In no way, shape, or ugly form are TSB summaries a "true representative copy" of the original document. Government Agrees to Post All Automaker Defect Info Are you ready for some very good (acronym-heavy) news? The Department of Transportation (DOT) and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) recently agreed to publicly post all vehicle technical service bulletins (TSB) following the lawsuit from the Center for Auto Safety (CAS). Whew. "NHTSA will also publicly post on its Web site the manufacturers' indexes to their communications as they are received." For the first time, consumers will be able to search for car problems that may not legally be defined as causing a risk to safety. CAS says the new measures will save consumers money on repairs for problems covered by a previously-hidden TSB, not to mention save lives. You'll soon know everything wrong with your car. That's wonderful (and a bit scary). Share — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format for any purpose, even commercially. Adapt — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially. The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms. Attribution — You must give appropriate credit , provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made . You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. ShareAlike — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original. No additional restriction — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. You do not have to comply with the license for elements of the material in the public domain or where your use is permitted by an applicable exception or limitation . No warranties are given. The license may not give you all of the permissions necessary for your intended use. For example, other rights such as publicity, privacy, or moral rights may limit how you use the material. This advertisement has not loaded yet, but your article continues below.Mechanic consulting repair software while diagnosing a vehicle. Photo by GettyReviews and recommendations are unbiased and products are independently selected. Postmedia may earn an affiliate commission from purchases made through links on this page.A Technical Service Bulletin (TSB) is a document that contains special instructions and procedures that can be used by technicians to correct or repair unanticipated problems with vehicles. The TSB may be written by an engineer, a software developer, or the first technician to come up with a fix for a given issue.Often, a TSB is released when technicians figure out an efficient fix for a problem reported by numerous owners. The idea is to create a useful reference for repair professionals within an automaker's service department. This advertisement has not loaded yet, but your article continues below.Once created, the TSB will live in a database where it's accessible by other technicians should they encounter a customer with the same problem. The goal is to create a more organized and straightforward repair, with less time troubleshooting.Read MoreFor instance, this TSB applies to the 2019 Ford Ranger. It says that some customers may report a rough, fast idle, and rough shifting when the engine is cold. These symptoms may be the result of faulty programming within the engine computer, which can be fixed with a simple software update.If you're a Ford technician and you've got a Ranger customer reporting symptoms like these, checking out this TSB may provide a quick and easy solution for the customer. If you're shopping used Ford Rangers, this TSB can give you an important issue to be on the lookout for when you take a test drive.Here's another example of a TSB for the 2017 Honda Ridgeline. In it, instructions are provided for technicians dealing with customer complaints relating to a jerky, juddery, clumsy feel from the transmission. This TSB is transmission-centric, and applies to other vehicles equipped with the same transmission. Diagnosing transmission issues can be time-consuming, so this TSB lays out some details and instructions technicians can reference for a quicker and more effective repair. In this case, a diagnostic procedure is laid out, as well as corrective steps to be taken along the way. The issue could be caused by a problem with the transmission fluid, or the transmission's ability to control the temperature of that fluid.Get your instant cash offer in under 2 minutes.This advertisement has not loaded yet, but your article continues below.By following the instructions in this TSB, technicians can more quickly diagnose and correct problems related to transmission operation and drivability. By being aware of this TSB, used Ridgeline shoppers can pay additional attention to the transmission's performance during their test drive, which can help them steer clear of potentially-problematic units.TSBs are not recalls Electronic module installation Photo by Getty/There are a few important facts about TSBs that are worth noting.First, TSBs are not recalls. Recalls deal with latent safety defects and are fixed by dealers, free of charge. Technical Service Bulletins don't necessarily deal with safety-related issues, and they're not covered for free (outside of a warranty setting).Second, some vehicles have no TSBs while others have many. A TSB may apply to a small number of vehicles, all vehicles in production, the entire model range from a manufacturer, or vehicles built within a certain date range. A TSB may apply to a specific component used in various models, like an engine or infotainment system.Third, many (if not most) model-specific online owner forums maintain a document or list of TSBs affecting the given model in question to help benefit current and future owners. Though intended for use by repair professionals, it's easy to find a list of TSBs that affect the car or truck you may be driving currently or are about to purchase.For instance, if you're considering a used Porsche Macan, you might visit an online owner's community like MacanForum.com to meet current owners and pick their brains, in order to make a better purchase decision.This advertisement has not loaded yet, but your article continues below.On that forum (and many like it) you'll find a listing of TSBs like this one, usually compiled by one or more members of the community with a technical or repair background. Here's a similar listing of TSBs for the fifth-generation Ford Ranger, one for the Dodge Charger, and another compiled by the Cadillac CTS-V owner community. Whatever used car you're considering, there's probably a well-maintained list of TSBs somewhere in an owner forum for you to check out. Some owner forums group TSBs into a subsection that also includes warranty issues, recalls, and common problems. In others, the TSB list is a standalone thread. Vehicle service Photo by Kiwis /GettyTo find the list of TSB's that may affect the used vehicle you're considering, you've got a few options.First, start by keying in the make and model of vehicle you're considering behind the words TSB and FORUM in your favourite search engine.For instance, maybe you're considering a used Hyundai Tucson.Typing "Hyundai Tucson TSB FORUM" into a search engine quickly links you to this forum discussion, which points to this page, where numerous TSBs are listed.If you're looking for Nissan TSBs, this site makes it easy to look up by make, model and year.You can also browse TSBs here with a VIN, thanks to the NHTSA. This site provides data specific to the American market, where automakers are required by law to make their TSBs (sometimes called 'manufacturer communications') public.Note that in other cases, a TSB may be called a 'campaign' or 'service campaign'.This advertisement has not loaded yet, but your article continues below. Mechanic working under the hood Photo by drapana91 /GettyAll said, with a few seconds of searching online, it's easy to find a list of TSBs, if applicable, for the model you're considering. You can use this information to your advantage; moreso if you understand what you're reading.Scan the headline text in the TSB section of the forums at Ranger5G.com, and you'll notice key words like 'rough brakes', 'transmission whine', and 'power fold mirrors inoperative', giving you a heads-up of a few issues to be on the lookout for when test-driving a used unit you're considering buying.Porsche Macan TSBs were released to deal with leaky rear washer sprayer nozzles, the body panel gap around the hood, and to correct programming with the AWD control unit. On the CTS-V owner forum, the TSB listing includes topics for leaky shocks, noisy sunroofs, loose seats and other potential issues to be on the lookout for.Remember: a TSB may (or may not) affect the specific used model you're considering, and if you find one online, the repair may have already been performed by a previous owner of the vehicle.Context is important. A TSB for a given problem doesn't necessarily mean that most (or even many) units of a given used vehicle will be suffering from the problem the TSB intends to deal with. Still, TSB information is generally available quickly and easily. If you know how to find and understand it, it can be a useful 'heads-up' for used car shoppers on the lookout for potential trouble before they buy.Sign up for our newsletter Blind-Spot Monitor and follow our social channels on X, Tiktok and LinkedIn to stay up to date on the latest automotive news, reviews, car culture, and vehicle shopping advice.More in Maintenance See more No impact on your credit scorePowered by This advertisement has not loaded yet, but your article continues below. Getty ImagesAutomobile manufacturers often put cars on the road with defects which become apparent long after the cars are sold. Sometimes, the fixes are easy. Other times, the problems are safety-related and not so easy to fix. Ignition switches that shut off randomly? Airbags that blast projectiles into the driver? We've seen it all by now. But when does the manufacturer have to fix something at no charge for the consumer? Follow along. If nothing else, you can use this information next time you buy a used car. Recalls are mandated by the government when a problem is found with an automobile which is safety related. Both the problems mentioned above affect safety and are the subject of recalls. As such, the manufacturer will have to make the repair at no charge to the car owner regardless of whether or not the car is still under a manufacturer's warranty. There have been all kinds of recalls over the years, many less serious than these. I got one for a Ford Explorer that indicated some Ford Explorer cruise control systems were subject to fire if the driver didn't disengage it properly. Ford came up with some sort of fix and made it available for free to anyone who had one of the Explorers at the time of the recall. (I know fire is serious but who doesn't know how to turn off their cruise?) The confusion arises when there is a widespread problem with a car that is not deemed a safety risk and the cars are out of warranty. Do you remember the paint delamination problem in the 1990s? Several auto manufacturers had issues with the paint on their cars peeling off in sheets, usually around the time the warranties on the cars had expired. Yes, it was a defect. No, it did not make the cars unsafe. The auto manufacturers had no legal obligation to repair the cars. Technical Service Bulletins are issued by manufacturers when there is a problem found in a number of cars which does not have an obvious fix. The TSB is a guide for mechanics to fix the problem but it is not a free fix by itself. Obviously, if the car is still under warranty and the TSB applies to a warranted problem, then the fix can be done under warranty. But I have heard from many consumers who have had problems with their cars which stymied the mechanics — only to have a TSB issued after the warranty expired. Or, they have a car that is outside of warranty and they hope the existence of a TSB means they get a free fix. No, the TSB just means they probably know how to fix the problem—but you will get charged for the repair. The good thing about Recalls and TSBs is that they are tracked by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. See www.nhtsa.gov. You can even run the Vehicle Identification Number of your car and find out if there are any outstanding recalls for it. Your car is acting up? Look up the TSBs for your car — maybe the manufacturer found a fix for it since the last time you were in the shop. Car shopping? Punch the VIN of the car you are looking at into the website. See if it has any outstanding recalls. Look at the TSBs to see what kinds of problems other cars like it have had. And then look for those problems on the test drive. NHTSA even tracks consumer complaints. These can be a goldmine. If you see that a hundred people have complained about the harsh shifting transmission in the car you are looking at, you will know to pay particularly close attention to how the car shifts during the test drive. And unlike that talking fox, NHTSA won't charge you to look up the data on a car you are thinking of buying. Steve Lehto is a writer and attorney from Michigan. He specializes in Lemon Law and frequently writes about cars and the law. His most recent books include Preston Tucker and His Battle to Build the Car of Tomorrow, and Dodge Daytona and Plymouth Superbird: Design, Development, Production and Competition. He also has a podcast where he talks about these things. Recalls Technical Service Bulletins (TSBs) Check for technical service bulletins (TSBs) on your vehicle by make, model, and year. Frequently Asked Questions - FAQ A Technical Service Bulletin (TSB) is a document that identifies an unanticipated vehicle or part issue and provides a solution. There can be more than one TSB for the same issue if different technicians or engineers have figured out different solutions. A TSB may be provided to dealerships, sent to auto repair shops, or sent out to vehicle owners, depending on the range and scope of the problem. What is the difference between a Recall and a Technical Service Bulletin? While a recall concerns a safety issue which must be fixed, a Technical Service Bulletin just identifies a common issue and documents a solution. The difference is that manufacturers are not required to make the repair at no cost for a problem documented in a TSB. However, the circulation of the bulletin amongst dealerships and manufacturers can help diagnose the issue and lead to faster and more efficient fixes. Do I have to pay or will the manufacturer pay for the TSB related repairs? Dealers and manufacturers are not required to pay for a repair indicated in a TSB since the issue is not identified as posing a safety concern. There may be repairs that a manufacturer agrees to pay for, however, particularly if the repair has the potential to cause a class-action lawsuit for the manufacturer, and these notifications evolve from a TSB into a 'service campaign' or 'service warranty'. How do I find out if a TSB has been issued for my vehicle or part of my vehicle? The Technical Service Bulletin tool on this site can be used to determine if there are outstanding TSBs on your vehicle. Simply select by vehicle year, make, and model.