



# Focus on **Motor Vehicle Emission Check Program**

From the Department of Ecology's Air Quality Program

## **What is the Emission Check Program?**

The Emission Check Program tests vehicle emissions to identify the most polluting vehicles. It requires these vehicles to be repaired so that their emissions are reduced.

## **Why do we need this program?**

Motor vehicles are Washington's largest source of air pollution. They account for more than 50 percent of air pollution statewide – nearly 1.3 million tons of air pollution per year. The Emission Check Program is required by federal law in areas that do not meet federal health-based standards for motor vehicles. In Washington, the urban areas of Clark, King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Spokane counties have experienced carbon monoxide or ground-level ozone air pollution problems, largely because of motor vehicles.

## **What vehicles have to be tested?**

The Emission Check Program applies to vehicles more than five and less than 25 years old that are registered in areas of King, Pierce, Snohomish, Spokane, and Clark counties. This includes both gasoline and diesel-powered cars, trucks, and buses.

Vehicles are tested every other year. Vehicle owners are notified on their license tab renewal notice when their vehicle needs a test.

State and local government vehicles in test areas must be tested annually. If 20 or more vehicles are kept at one location, they must be tested even if they are not in a test area.

Used cars purchased from private parties must be inspected prior to transferring the registration or title if the vehicle has not been tested within the previous 12 months. Vehicles must either pass the test or receive a waiver in order to be re-licensed.

## **The test**

An emission check measures carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons (partially burned gasoline) from gasoline vehicles, and smoke levels from diesel vehicles. If excessive levels of these pollutants are found, the vehicle must be repaired.

The test procedure has been modified over the years to better simulate real driving conditions. Most 1996 and newer gasoline cars and light trucks receive a computer check instead of the tailpipe test previously used on most vehicles. Data from the on-board computer reveals engine or emission control problems, often in their early stages. Repairs can then help prevent high emissions.

All gasoline vehicles also receive a gas cap leak inspection. Well-sealed gas caps are required to prevent emissions of unburned gasoline fumes. Gas caps with poor seals must be replaced.

## The test fee

The Emission Check fee is \$15, payable by cash, check, or credit card at the test station. There is no charge for the first retest, but after that, each test is \$15.

## What happens if a vehicle fails the test?

More than 80 percent of all vehicles pass the test on the first try. However, if a vehicle fails, the driver receives a list of Ecology-authorized repair shops. Most vehicles pass the test after receiving appropriate repairs, with the goal of reducing emissions.

There is no restriction on who performs repair work, as long as the vehicle passes a retest. But to be eligible for a waiver, diagnosis and repairs must be performed as explained in the “Waivers” section below.

## Waivers

A vehicle owner may obtain a waiver if, after the vehicle fails an emission test:

- + Diagnosis and repairs have been done by an Ecology-authorized emission specialist at an authorized repair shop; AND
- + The vehicle fails a retest after the vehicle owner has invested \$100 or more on proper diagnosis and repairs with a pre-1981 vehicle; or \$150 or more for a 1981 or newer vehicle.

## History of the program

Washington’s Emission Check Program began in Seattle and its suburban areas in 1982, and then in Spokane and some suburbs in 1985. In 1993, Ecology expanded the program to include the Vancouver area, more of Spokane’s suburbs, and more of the Puget Sound region. In 1993, diesel vehicles were added to the program. The Washington State Legislature passed a law in 1998 exempting vehicles newer than five and older than 25 years from the program, starting in 2000.

## Will we continue to need this program?

New technologies have resulted in cleaner new cars. In addition, most newer vehicles have computer systems (on-board diagnostics, or OBD) that monitor their emission control equipment. Emission testing methods are changing to accommodate these new technologies; for example, vehicles with OBD systems receive a test of that system rather than a tailpipe test. Although testing methods may change in response to new technologies, the need to verify that vehicles are running properly still remains. Cars and trucks remain our largest source of air pollution, and vehicle use is growing two to three times faster than Washington’s rate of population growth. This threatens to undo our past accomplishments in controlling and reducing vehicle emissions.

## More information

In Clark and Pierce counties:

1-800-453-4951

In King and Snohomish counties:

(425) 649-7021 or 1-800-272-3780

In Spokane County:

Please ask for the Emission Check staff  
on call at (509) 329-3491

*If you need this information in an alternate format, please contact Tami Dahlgren at (360) 407-6800. If you are a person with a speech or hearing impairment, call 711, or 1-800-833-6388 for TTY.*