

# Transmission Fluid Color: What Does It Mean?

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Transmission fluid (or the transmission for that matter) isn't the sort of thing most people think of very often. If your vehicle is running well, you probably don't give it a second thought. But ***if you're starting to notice any changes or hesitations in the way your vehicle shifts gears, you might start to think about the transmission.*** Transmission repair or replacement can be quite expensive, so it's important to remember to ***check the transmission fluid regularly.*** Keeping on top of this vital component can help to ***extend the life of your transmission*** and save you from costly repairs.

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Transmission fluid is something you can check yourself on most automatic vehicles. But if you're like most people, you might need a little assistance knowing just what you're checking. To find out, keep reading.

## **What is Transmission Fluid?**

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Transmission fluid is a lubricant designed to optimize the functioning of a motor vehicle transmission, including lubricating valve operations, and reducing torque converter friction, brake friction, and facilitating proper operation of other parts.

All vehicles with automatic transmissions require transmission fluid. Some vehicles with manual transmissions use transmission fluid, but others use gear oil or even engine oil.

## **Problems with Transmission Fluid**

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Not all transmissions are alike, but they all require servicing after wear and tear causes debris to accumulate the transmission fluid. Problems can also develop inside a transmission that can lead to damage or degradation of the fluid, which can then lead to further problems.

Poor quality transmission fluid, or a low fluid level can lead to symptoms in a transmission's functioning. If the fluid is too low, the transmission may overheat. If the transmission fluid quality is poor, which you can often determine by the look and smell of the fluid, you may experience one of these symptoms of transmission problems:

- There may be a momentary delay in motion after shifting gears.
- The transmission may hesitate before you feel it *registering* the shift in gear.
- The transmission might grind.
- It may make a clunking noise during shifting.
- In some cases, transmissions start slipping from one gear into a different one (often into Neutral), which is a dangerous problem.

Excessive transmission fluid thickness can also prevent proper flow of the lubricant through the transmission, which can lead to various issues.

## **What Should Transmission Fluid Look and Smell Like?**

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It might be surprising to discover how much critical information about your vehicle transmission can be acquired by evaluating the appearance and odor of the transmission fluid. But, knowing and understanding information about appropriate transmission fluid smell and appearance is an automobile owner's first line of defense against premature transmission repair or replacement.

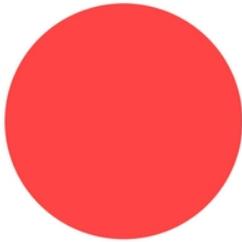
## **What Color is Transmission Fluid?**

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Here is a general guide to the colors of transmission fluid when new and throughout the phases of change over time as the fluid is exposed to normal use inside a vehicle, and/or to potential transmission problems that can affect the condition of the fluid:

## What Color is Transmission Fluid?

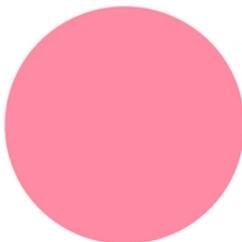
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### Bright Red Transmission Fluid Equals New

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Brand new transmission fluid is usually a dark red color, so this is a good sign. It should also be translucent or see-through. Transmission fluid that is in ideal condition should be comparatively odorless or even have a faintly sweet aroma. If your transmission fluid is a deep hue of see-through red and doesn't have any off-putting smell to it, you're in great shape. Just continue routine monitoring of your vehicle's mileage and/or the amount of time passed since the last time you had transmission service, to determine when you should have a checkup and routine servicing of the transmission.



### Pink Transmission Fluid is Good

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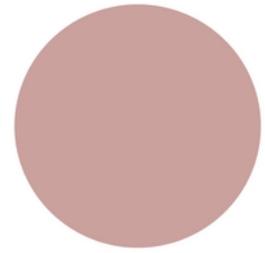
As transmission fluid starts to age, it will fade slightly in color. If you check your transmission fluid and it turns out pink or pinkish-red, you're still in pretty good shape. In this range, it's unlikely that your transmission fluid would be to blame for any issues, so if you're having them, it's time to bring the vehicle in.

***However, if it is a cloudy, foamy, milkshake pink color, it usually means you've experienced a failure in your radiator. This could also mean water contamination.***

### Pinkish Brown Transmission Fluid is Borderline

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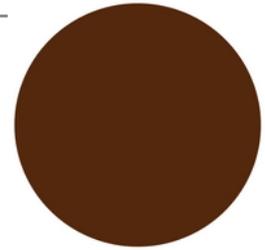
As the transmission fluid continues aging, the fluid can start to break down. If it's starting to look more brown than pink, it's getting close to time to change it. A slightly brownish tint, and a lightly burned odor, like burning marshmallows, means the fluid is starting to become burned. At this stage, it's probably time for transmission maintenance service. If it appears to be working well, then just plan to have a transmission fluid change sometime in the reasonably near future.



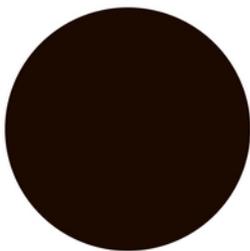
### **Brown Transmission Fluid is Bad**

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If your transmission fluid is fully brown, it's worn out, and you want to get it changed right away. It could indicate that the fluid's ability to remove heat has been lost. You are starting to run the risk of damage to the transmission if you don't get it changed soon. Brown transmission fluid that smells like burnt toast or smells like varnish is burned, and you might have already been experiencing operating problems with your transmission.



But, if the transmission seems to be working well, having the fluid completely replaced and changing the filter might be enough to avoid a serious problem. However, at this point, it's clear enough that the transmission is becoming worn, and the most you can expect from this level of servicing is to gain some time before you must have transmission work.

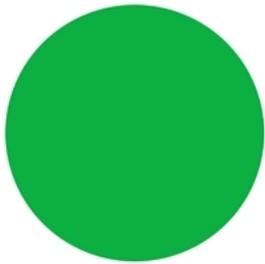
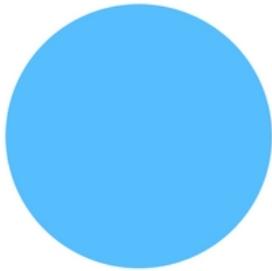


### **Black Transmission Fluid is Burnt**

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If your fluid is black or has a burnt smell to it, it's no longer able to do its job, and there is likely some damage to your transmission. You'll want to get your transmission serviced as quickly as possible. You really want to avoid your transmission fluid getting to this stage. If the transmission is damaged, a repair or replacement will be needed soon. If your transmission fluid is black with an extreme stench — the fluid is burned to a serious degree, and the transmission will probably need rebuilding or replacement. Related issues may also now exist, such as a cooling system problem or clogging in the trans cooler. These systems need to be examined, to avoid the risk of transmission failure again after rebuilding.

Excessively hot transmission fluid has a different smell, more like burning rubber than burnt oil. This can indicate either that transmission fluid is leaking and is dripping onto hot parts of the engine, in which case transmission fluid leak repair is required. Or, this odor can be caused by transmission fluid that is in extremely dirty condition, in which case it must be drained completely and replaced with new fluid, in order to avoid risk of transmission failure.



### **Other Unusual Colors**

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Some manufacturers have started dyeing certain transmission fluids with bright, translucent blue or green. These colors aren't a cause for alarm, and the continuum works the same. The darker, browner, and more opaque it gets, the more important it is to change.

### **Transmission Fluid Viscosity**

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Transmission fluid is a fairly thin lubricant, significantly thinner than motor oil. Normally, transmission fluid does become slightly thicker over time. When the fluid is becoming too viscous and is not flowing properly through the transmission, it is probably time to flush and replace transmission fluid.

Transmission fluid becomes thinner when the transmission is in use while the vehicle is running, and then it thickens a little after cooling during the hours after use. The best time to check the transmission fluid level is after the vehicle has been running, in order to get the most accurate measurement. Keep in mind that if the transmission fluid contains much particulate matter, that can impact the accuracy of the fluid level reading.

## **Other Methods of Determining the Condition of Your Transmission**

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The condition of the transmission fluid is just one of numerous things a technician will inspect to determine the health of a [vehicle transmission](#). The examination must also include looking for any form of material loose in the transmission pan, indicators of issues identified in the computer system's codes, and the vehicle's operating condition as it pertains to the transmission, among other inspection points.

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This handy color guide should help to demystify this process for you. If you've checked your transmission fluid and the results are anywhere past a translucent pink, you don't want to delay and risk a costly transmission replacement.

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