



AN ORDINARY DIPSTICK'S POINT OF VIEW

by Steven Berkman

Oil Life Monitors: The Light at the End of the Tunnel or Just Another Scam?

I apologize to those of you who were expecting either a straightforward rant or my usual philosophical musings. This month's article is actually going to relate directly to service intervals and your bottom dollar. Let me preface this article by stating up front that although I have performed extensive research on the subject of oil life monitors and consider myself well informed, I welcome any further info you may have. So here it is: Oil life monitors are here to stay and they are in an increasing number of vehicles. Almost all the GM and many European vehicles have them. If I had a nickel for every time I have been told, "I change my oil when the light comes on," I would be able to retire and stop chasing the almighty dollar. No matter how hard you preach a 3,000-mile oil change to customers, they want to believe this idiot light that pops up on their dash, and they don't believe you because they perceive that you are just looking for more business.

What is an oil life monitor and how does it work? The first part of this question is simple. An oil life monitor (in theory, anyway) monitors your oil and lets you know when it needs changing. Nice idea if it really worked that way! The oil life monitors we see in today's vehicles are the product of a simple algorithm. The most sophisticated of them monitor engine temperature, revolutions, the mileage since last change and a calendar function. They use this info to extrapolate the time when you should be due for an oil change.

Being the skeptic I am, I question this dubious new math put forth by the car gods. First of all, the mileage for the recommended interval is based on the manufacturer's suggested interval for "normal" conditions, not severe conditions. When did anyone in a major metropolitan area ever drive in anything but severe conditions? Short trips, lousy gas, stop and go traffic! Secondly, whose definition of oil life are we using, anyway? The manufacturers don't take into account what happens to gas mileage over the life of oil. Is your oil's life used up when gas mileage starts to drop? Or does it still have a few good miles left as long as its additives and sheer viscosity are intact?


Let's assume that the manufacturer doesn't really care about saving you money and instead would like to be able to sell you a car by saying it has low maintenance and that they will perform this maintenance for free at their specified intervals. Is this too much of a stretch? Based on this far out scenario, the manufacturer would benefit by stretching oil change intervals as far as they can. What a surprise! Every oil life monitor I could find sold in the U.S. either uses this algorithm or

simply pops on a light at 7,500 to 15,000 miles. There is no actual physical testing or monitoring of the oil itself. The viscosity, sheer factors, anti-foaming agents and dirt suspension agents are all ignored by the oil life monitors.

Of course, I tested this with my own vehicle, a 2004 Saab convertible. The car was factory-filled with synthetic oil. The light came on at 8,400 miles and said I had 8 percent oil life left. I changed the oil, putting in conventional oil, not synthetic, and sent off the old oil for analysis. The oil life monitor was not able to differentiate between synthetic and conventional oils, and the oil analysis did not corroborate the car's finding that 8 percent of oil life remained. The light would have popped on at around 8,400 miles again if I had not forced Saab to buy the car back before then. In fact, there is only one oil life monitor that tests any of these factors. It does so by firing an electrical charge through the oil. Kind of like sonar, I guess. It was too complicated for this simple soul. This system is not used in mainstream autos or even in the U.S. market. I guess cell phones aren't the only area where this great country of ours lags behind when it comes to technology.

Had enough techno mumbo jumbo? If you are still awake, here's what it boils down to. Change your oil! The car companies are out to make money. The more complicated they can make it for the aftermarket and the more simplistic they can make it for the customer, the more money the dealers are going to make. That light does not represent fact. It represents an educated guess based on the best-case scenario. I tell my customers this: "The light is based on an algorithm, which is computer-speak for a guess. Change your oil every 3,000 miles; the benefits outweigh any difference in cost over the lifetime of your car. The light gives you a best-case scenario. If you need to find a compromise, use the severe operating guidelines of your manual."

Please excuse me for my self-righteous indignation, but I need facts, not a guess. In this author's opinion, oil life monitors should be renamed, "Hey-idiot-your-oil-change-is-way-overdue" lights. They really are no different than the idiot light that pops up to inform the driver that he or she is out of gas. That being said, I almost always wait too long before getting gas. Oops!

And that's just an ordinary dipstick's point of view. 

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