

Nursing it home in the dark

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Just about everyone has had that sickening feeling... something's wrong with the car and you're miles from home. I've experienced it myself recently when the alternator belt let go on my '99... twice. :o(

So here are some thoughts, guidelines and maybe a few things you hadn't thought of, to help you get home with a broken car on some dark, rainy night. For each situation, I'll hazard a guess as to how far you might be able to go. Don't take it as gospel, you're mileage may vary; significantly!

Check Engine Light

That mysterious little orange light is designed to let you know when something's not right. If the light comes on and the car is still running OK, you're fine to drive it home and get it looked at later. If the light comes on and is flashing ('97 & later), get the car to a safe spot and shut it down. In the magical world of the CEL light, flashing means that there's an ignition misfire and continuing to drive the car is going to hurt the catalytic converter or worse. *[How low can you go? Solid light = as far as you want; Flashing light = get to a safe spot pronto]*

Alternators and Batteries

Loosing the alternator will cause the "battery" light to come on. The car will still run, the lights will dim and you're draining the battery every second. I've driven a Miata on the battery for 15 miles or more. How long it'll last depends on a lot of factors, but you can help it limp longer. First, turn off everything in the car: radio, defroster, fan; the works. Dim the dash lights. Don't use the wipers, turn signals or brakes! What? That's because they all draw significant current. Use hand signals and the handbrake instead of the brake. This can be the difference between getting home or pushing it the last few MILES. *[How low can you go? 15 miles or more depending on conditions]*

You likely won't notice a dead battery until you try to start the car. Assuming that you've got cables and can get it jumped, you should be able to drive it home as long as you don't shut it off. This also assumes that the alternator is working properly... *[How low can you go? As far as you want if you don't shut it off]*

Snapped Belts

Watch the temp gauge closely if you've lost the alternator belt. It also runs the water pump ('90-'05)! They say a snapped belt can be temporarily replaced by a pair of party hose, twisted up and tied around the pulleys. I've never seen it done, but I've met at least one person who said it worked for them. On the '05 and earlier cars, I'd try swapping the power steering belt onto the alternator. It's practically the same size and might work in a pinch. Of course, that's assuming you're carrying a flat screwdriver, ratchet, 12mm & 14mm sockets and a 14mm wrench with you! *[How low can you go? See Losing the Alternator above, don't let it overheat]*

A snapped power steering belt is more an inconvenience than anything. In the '90-'05 cars it only runs the power steering and A/C, if you have it. Just drive the darn thing home... *[How low can you go? As far as you can stand]*

Busted Hoses

Driving with a busted hose isn't recommended. Depending on the hose, you're either losing coolant, fuel or vacuum and none will likely end well. Fortunately, duct tape will hold vacuum, pressure and coolant, so it can be used to mend most hoses in an emergency. It is easily dissolved by gasoline though, so don't even think about fixing a fuel line with it. If a hose is split near the end, you may be able to cut off the split end and reconnect the hose if you have enough slack and the screwdriver and pliers do to it. *[How low can you go? Not far probably, get it to a safe spot]*

Hydraulics

Both the braking system and clutch engagement work via hydraulics. The symptom usually involves the offending pedal going to the floor with little resistance. Pumping the pedal will work for a short while until the system runs completely dry. You're going to need some brake fluid to dump into the associated reservoir (big one = brakes, little one = clutch). Once you've added some fluid, pumping the pedal may get it working long enough to get home. If the clutch won't engage, you can try rev matching in order to shift gears in a pinch. If it's the brakes, use the e-brake! NOTE: I can't recommend driving anywhere with brakes that aren't working properly! I've done it, but I'm telling you not to, OK? *[How low can you go? Clutch = as long as the fluid holds out; Brakes = how good is your e-brake?]*

Tires

I'm not going to say much here except don't try running on a flat tire unless it's a dire emergency. Get it off the road and change it out... unless you've got the runflat tires included on some of the newer cars. Even then, they don't recommend you go very far or very fast. If you carry an emergency toolkit in your car, consider adding a dead-blow hammer. They're less than \$10 and are perfect for getting the wheel unstuck from the hub due to galvanic corrosion between the alloy wheel and steel brake disc. It's no fun trying to change a flat when you have all the lug nuts off but the wheel is frozen on! *[How low can you go? Find a safe spot pronto]*

Getting off the road

If you have to, finding a safe spot to pull over can be a trick sometimes. Somewhere smooth and flat is preferable, but you take what you can get. Under a street light is good at night, near an exit is nice when you're on the freeway. Put the hood up, so a passing law enforcement officer can see that you're stranded. Turn the flashers on, unless there's a problem with the battery. Call for help. Set out a flare or safety reflector if you have it. This can be especially important if you're over a blind crest! Ask me how I know that one...

Ultimately, it's up to you to decide when to try to nurse it home and when to call the tow-truck. Sometimes, you don't need to get all the way home, just to a better spot than the one you're in. Of course, all the usual safety warnings and procedures apply! May all your travels be safe and worry-free...

The Small Print: *Side effects may include night sweats, heartburn, sudden diarrhea or even death. Some patients have reported disturbing dreams and strong urges to gamble. See your doctor immediately if you notice these symptoms.*