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Car Repairs and the Law

Car repairs are inevitable necessities for most people, but finding an honest mechanic at a fair price is not always easy. It may be difficult for most consumers to identify mistakes that were made or short cuts that are taken by mechanics. That is, at least until something goes wrong! However, becoming an informed consumer is one of the best defenses. This article focuses on legal and practical issues with regard to car repairs.

See [Dealer Used Car Sales and Warranties](#) and [Consumer Warranty Basics](#) for related information.

Where to Go for Car Repairs

There is no one-size-fits-all answer to the question of where you should get your car repaired. It really depends on the kind of car, whether it is warranty-related work, and whether it is something simple, like an oil change that can be performed at a larger tune-up chain, among other considerations. Often the best way to find a reliable and affordable mechanic is through word of mouth. Of course, those who know how to repair their own cars have the best insight into their car's condition, and can save money.

Car repair shops can be categorized as one of three main types, each with its strengths and weaknesses:

- *Car Dealerships:* On one hand, mechanics at the dealership likely will be very familiar with the make and model of your car than general auto repair shops (mechanics often receive specialized training). But since repairs at dealerships tend to be quite expensive, many car owners tend to limit the use of dealership mechanics to just warranty-related repairs.
- *General Repair Shops:* While parts often cost more at service stations, as compared to dealerships, labor often is less expensive. But finding a skilled, honest, and affordable mechanic can sometimes be tricky.
- *Auto Repair Chains:* These types of repair shops tend to focus on one thing, whether it is routine oil changes, mufflers, or brakes, but some such chains offer a more complete list of services. Chains can usually offer a relatively low price because they operate such a high volume. These types of chains are best for specific types of routine maintenance.

Cost Estimates for Repairs

Several states require mechanics to provide consumers with a cost estimate before they begin any car repair work, but most repair shops are more than willing to provide one anyway. Some repair shops charge a fee for estimates, since car owners often shop around for deals and will not necessarily use a given repair shop for the actual work, but they must notify consumers about any such fees. Additionally, many statutes requiring estimates also stipulate that the final cost may not exceed the estimate over a certain percentage.

Illinois' [Automotive Repair Act](#), for example, provides two options for vehicle repair facilities: They must either provide a written estimate for the price of labor and parts (final bill must not exceed the estimate by more than 10 percent) or provide a written price limit for each specific procedure (final bill for each procedure must not exceed the estimate without owner's consent). The Illinois statute goes into additional details about how labor costs should be calculated, estimates for suggested repairs, reassembly charges, and so on.

Refusal to Pay for Auto Repairs

If, for whatever reason, you decide you do not want to pay for the services provided by a car repair shop, the shop may be legally entitled to keep your car. The owner of the shop would obtain a [mechanic's lien](#), provided he or she is in compliance with any applicable laws requiring estimates. A lien is a legal claim against property that has been improved or otherwise serviced.

Even if your car is a \$50,000 luxury vehicle that received a \$35 oil change, the mechanic may keep and ultimately sell your car if you do not pay the bill in a timely manner.

Unfair and Deceptive Acts and Practices Statutes

All states have some kind of statute addressing consumer protection against unfair and deceptive acts and practices (sometimes referred to as UDAP), but they vary from one state to the next. They address a wide variety of practices, including predatory lending and automobile sales. In addition, they typically require auto repair shops to disclose certain information to consumers, such as specific details of the pre-work estimate and whether any rebuilt parts are used.

UDAP laws may also require same-day repairs, unless more time is reasonably needed or you have agreed to a delay. Additionally, some states require mechanics to correct poor repair work for no additional fee or post price lists in a way that is clear to customers.

Contact your state attorney general's office if you believe your car repairs or the manner in which they were handled, failed to meet your state's requirements under a UDAP law.

Unauthorized Repairs

Sometimes, especially if you have a much older car and not much money, you might just get work done on your car that is considered crucial and let some other problems go by the wayside. But if the mechanic has made any unauthorized repairs and demands payment, provided it was completely unrelated to the original problem, you may be able to sue the mechanic.

Making unnecessary repairs or failing to put in the proper part(s) would also fall under the category of unauthorized repairs. But, if the shop made a good faith effort to solve a problem and fixed something else along the way, perhaps as a possible solution to the original problem, paying for the car repair work may be the best move.

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