

California Smog Check Program

Questions and Answers



What is the Smog Check Program?

The Smog Check Program is a vehicle emissions inspection program that is an important part of the State's efforts to improve the quality of air we breathe. Smog Check inspections are designed to identify and either repair or retire high-polluting vehicles. Approximately 10 million vehicles are inspected each year under the program. The Smog Check Program has greatly reduced air pollution created by millions of cars in California. According to the California Air Resources Board (ARB), the program removes about 400 tons of smog-forming pollutants from California's air every day.

Who administers the Smog Check Program?

The California Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA), Bureau of Automotive Repair (BAR) administers the Smog Check Program. The Department licenses approximately 7,500 stations and about 21,000 technicians to perform Smog Check inspections and emissions-related repairs of vehicles.

What vehicles require a Smog Check?

Gas-powered vehicles, model-years 1976 and newer, including hybrid-powered 2000 and newer model-years, are subject to the Smog Check Program with the following exceptions: (1) the first six model-years are exempt from the biennial Smog Check requirement, and (2) the first four model-years are exempt from the change-of-ownership inspection requirement. Diesel-powered vehicles model-years 1998 and newer, with a gross vehicle weight rating up to 14,000 pounds, are subject to the Smog Check Program. There are no new vehicle exemptions for diesel vehicles as there are with gas vehicles. Other exempt vehicles include two- cylinder vehicles,

electric-powered vehicles, two-cycle-powered vehicles (not including rotary engines) and motorcycles.

Is the Smog Check Program biased against older vehicles?

No. While California law requires the Smog Check Program to focus on high-polluting vehicles, the Smog Check Program also does not require older vehicles to meet the same emissions standards as newer vehicles. Smog Check emissions standards take into consideration the age, make and model of each vehicle, so

that a vehicle is never held to a standard that applied when the vehicle was originally manufactured.

My 1976 model-year vehicle was built in 1975. Why isn't it exempt from Smog Check?

The Smog Check exemption is based on the model-year of the vehicle, not the date of manufacture. Accordingly, a 1976 model-year vehicle is not exempt.

I have a vehicle that is six model-years old. My DMV registration renewal notice says it must have a Smog Check, but I thought it was exempt from the biennial Smog Check requirement.

A gas-powered vehicle is excused from Smog Check until it is seven model-years old. Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) computers are designed to recognize the exemption and process your renewal accordingly. Contact DMV if you think there is an error. If you are unable to resolve the problem with DMV, a state Referee



facility may be able to help. Call the Referee Call Center at 800.622.7733 to schedule an appointment.

Are government-owned vehicles subject to Smog Check?

Yes. Federal, state, county, city, and special district agencies that own or lease passenger vehicles or light-duty trucks are subject to the Smog Check Program. The Federal Clean Air Act and California Health and Safety Code mandate that all vehicles subject to the Smog Check Program receive an inspection. These requirements include vehicles classified as emergency equipment.

What is an Enhanced Area?

An Enhanced Area is an urban region designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as not being in attainment with federal health standards for ozone. Vehicles registered in an Enhanced Area are subject to a treadmill emissions test on a dynamometer and may require testing at a STAR-certified station.

Where does the money from the Smog Check go?

There are approximately 7,500 privately owned and operated Smog Check stations in California. The inspection and repair fees they charge are neither set nor collected by BAR. Rather, prices are market driven. An \$8.25 Smog Check certificate fee is assessed on vehicles once they pass their Smog Check. This money funds BAR, including administration of the Smog Check Program and consumer protection operations relating to auto repair.

Have California vehicle emissions standards changed?

Yes. BAR periodically adjusts some standards to increase their fairness. As a result, some standards become slightly more stringent than they were previously and some slightly more

lenient. California's emissions standards consider the model-year, vehicle make and model, and gross weight of the vehicle. Older cars have less stringent standards than newer ones. No older vehicle is ever held to the same standards as a newer, more technologically advanced vehicle. Allowances are made for normal wear and tear in a vehicle's emissions control system as it ages. Standards are established through a regulatory process and are made available for public comment before they are adopted. The last adjustment occurred in 2001.

What is a Test-Only station?

Test-Only stations are licensed by BAR to only perform Smog Check inspections. These stations are not authorized to diagnose the reasons for a Smog Check failure, or perform repairs on vehicles.

What is a Test-and-Repair station?

Test-and-Repair stations are licensed by BAR to perform Smog Check inspections and repairs on vehicles.

What is a Repair-Only station?

Repair-Only stations are licensed by BAR to diagnose and perform emissions-related repairs on vehicles.

Where can I find Smog Check stations in my area?

To find a Smog Check station near you, visit www.smogcheck.ca.gov or call 800.952.5210.

STAR PROGRAM

What is a STAR station?

STAR stations are Smog Check stations that meet higher performance standards established by BAR. Some STAR stations are licensed to perform only tests, while others are licensed to perform both tests and repairs. The station is required to post a sign on the services it performs.

How will I know if I need to take my car to a STAR station?

Your Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) registration renewal indicates whether your vehicle must be inspected at a STAR station.

How can I find a STAR station near me?

To find a STAR station near you, please call 800.952.5210 or visit www.smogcheck.ca.gov and click on: [Find a Smog Check Station](#).

Why am I being sent to a STAR station?

State law requires that a percentage of vehicles have their Smog Check inspections performed at a STAR station. One reason may be that your vehicle was identified as being more likely than others to emit unhealthy levels of harmful pollutants. This may be true even though your vehicle may never have failed a Smog Check. Another possibility is that your vehicle was chosen as part of a random selection for Smog Check Program evaluation purposes.

SMOG CHECK INSPECTION

How often does my vehicle have to be tested?

Smog Check inspections are required biennially (every other year) on vehicles more than six model-years old. Additionally, a Smog Check is required if you sell a vehicle that is more than four model-years old and when registering an out-of-state vehicle for the first time in California.

How long does a Smog Check take?

The average Smog Check inspection takes about 20-30 minutes to complete.

How much does a Smog Check cost?

The cost of a Smog Check inspection varies. Prices for Smog Checks are not regulated by the State, so you may want to shop around. For a list of stations in your area, visit www.smogcheck.ca.gov or call 800.952.5210.

How long is a Smog Check certificate valid?

An electronic certificate of compliance is issued and stored at DMV when a vehicle passes a Smog Check inspection. The certificate is valid for 90 days.

How can I help my vehicle pass a Smog Check inspection?

Performing regular and proper vehicle maintenance according to your owner's manual and not tampering with the emissions control equipment are keys to passing Smog Check. If the "Check Engine" light comes on, take your vehicle to a licensed repair station as soon as you can to have the problem diagnosed. Consult your owner's manual for repairs that may be covered under your emissions warranty.

What is a "pre-test?"

A pre-test or pre-inspection is an unofficial test provided as an option to vehicle owners prior to having an official Smog Check inspection performed on the vehicle. Smog Check stations may charge for this service if authorized by the consumer.

What is a Directed Vehicle?

State law requires that a percentage of vehicles have their Smog Check Inspection performed at a STAR station. One reason may be that your vehicle was identified as being more likely than others to emit unhealthy levels of harmful pollutants, even though it may never have failed a Smog Check. Another possibility is that your vehicle was chosen as part of a random selection for program evaluation purposes.

What is a Gross Polluter?

A Gross Polluter is a vehicle with excess hydrocarbon, carbon monoxide or oxides of nitrogen emissions as established by DCA and ARB. Gross Polluters can only be certified at a STAR station which will confirm the vehicle was repaired and brought into compliance with required emissions standards. BAR identifies

these vehicles to encourage their immediate repair.

What happens if my vehicle fails a Smog Check Inspection?

In order to complete your registration, you will need to obtain the repairs necessary for the vehicle to pass a Smog Check retest. Before beginning repairs, you may want to find out if you are eligible for the Consumer Assistance Program. If there is a dispute about the results of your Smog Check inspection or if you would like a second opinion, contact the Referee Call Center at 800.622.7733 to schedule an appointment.

What are the elements of a Smog Check?

In order for your vehicle to receive a certificate of compliance, it must pass **all** of the following elements of a Smog Check inspection:

- **Visual Inspection** - Verifies that the required emission control components and systems are present and properly connected.
- **Functional Inspection** – Verifies the functionality and/or integrity of certain emission control systems. As applicable to the vehicle, these may include the malfunction indicator light ("Check Engine," etc.), gas cap, exhaust gas recirculation (EGR) system, ignition timing, and fuel evaporative system. A functional check of a vehicle's On-board Diagnostic (OBD) system is also performed on 1996 and newer vehicles.
- **Tailpipe Inspection** - Measures exhaust emissions using a probe that is inserted into the vehicle's tailpipe. Vehicles pass or fail this part of a Smog Check based on established emission standards, also known as "cut points." Effective April 2014, tailpipe inspections are only required for 1999 and older model-year gas-powered vehicles. Some 2000 and newer model-year vehicles

that are not equipped with OBD II systems or that have problematic OBD II systems will also require a tailpipe inspection.

Why are additional inspections of a vehicle necessary if it passes a tailpipe inspection?

The tailpipe test alone cannot guarantee that a car is not emitting harmful amounts of pollutants into California's air.

The visual and functional inspections of a vehicle's emission control components and system ensures that the vehicle has all required equipment and that the systems are working properly. These inspections also help prevent evaporative emissions. These type of emissions are created even when the vehicle is not operational.

The visual and functional tests also help identify vehicles with tampered (i.e. missing, modified, or disconnected) emissions control systems. These vehicles may be configured to pass the tailpipe portion of the Smog Check inspection, but altered later to produce more emissions than allowed.

How can I be sure of my vehicle's Smog Check results?

All Smog Check equipment must be certified by BAR and meet stringent accuracy standards. Additionally, BAR certified Smog Check equipment requires calibration every three days. If the Smog Check equipment is not calibrated within that period of time, the equipment will not allow any further tests to be performed until a full calibration is complete. In addition, if the equipment experiences any type of system failure, it will automatically lock out the Smog Check inspector from conducting further tests until a representative of the equipment manufacturer has identified and corrected any problems.

Can the inspector refuse to test my vehicle for any reason?

Yes. The inspector is authorized to refuse a vehicle that is determined to be unsafe to test.

What is On-Board Diagnostics II?

On-Board Diagnostics (OBD) II is the second generation of self-diagnostic equipment requirements for California certified vehicles. On-board diagnostic capabilities are incorporated into the hardware and software of a vehicle's on-board computer to monitor virtually every component that can affect emission performance. OBD II systems routinely check each component to verify that it is functioning properly. If a problem or malfunction is detected, the OBD II system illuminates a warning light on the vehicle instrument panel to alert the driver. This warning light typically displays the phrase "Check Engine" or "Service Engine Soon." The system also stores important information about the detected malfunction so that a licensed Smog Check repair technician can accurately find and fix the problem.

Who can I contact if I am not satisfied with the testing or repair of my vehicle?

If you have concerns about the testing or repair of your vehicle, please go to www.smogcheck.ca.gov or contact the Department of Consumer Affairs at 800.952.5210.

How can I be sure a Smog Check inspector or repair technician has had proper training?

Inspectors and technicians are licensed by BAR to perform emissions testing and/or repairs after meeting certain educational and experience requirements, and then passing a written exam. Continuing education is required for inspectors and repair technicians to maintain their license. To be sure the individual inspecting or repairing your car is licensed by BAR, look at his or her license posted in the station. The license

contains the licensee's photograph. You can also verify a license and check to see if there are any disciplinary actions against the licensee by checking online at www.smogcheck.ca.gov.

Does my vehicle need to have a Smog Check if I am in the military and stationed in California?

Yes. This requirement is independently enforced by each military base. Generally, military personnel must obtain a passing Vehicle Inspection Report (VIR).

What is a VIR?

A Vehicle Inspection Report (VIR) is provided by a Smog Check station to a vehicle owner upon completion of a Smog Check inspection. This VIR provides details on the tests performed during the inspection. It is not necessary to provide this document to DMV, but it should be kept as evidence of a passing inspection.

What if my vehicle's engine or emission control components have been modified from their original design?

In general, state and federal law prohibit modifications to your vehicle's emission control system. When repairing your vehicle, the emission-related parts used must be original equipment manufacturer (OEM) parts or be replacements for the OEM parts, as specified by the part manufacturer.

Modifications to your emissions controls are not acceptable unless the parts used are approved by ARB. ARB grants approvals in cases where the changes or aftermarket parts do not modify the performance of the emission controls in a way that increases emissions. ARB assigns the approved parts an "executive order" (EO) number that may be used to verify acceptability. ARB provides a listing of EO exempted parts on their Web site at www.arb.ca.gov.

Minor changes that do not affect the connectivity with or operation of other emission controls are

acceptable. For example, the installation of an universal replacement hose in place of a preformed hose would be allowed.

Can I change the engine in my vehicle?

An engine change may not be performed if it degrades the effectiveness of a vehicle's emissions control systems. For more information, see BAR's [Engine Change Guidelines](#).

VEHICLE REGISTRATION

What if DMV has not received the electronic certificate when I attempt to register my vehicle?

If you are going to register your vehicle in person at a Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) field office, be sure to bring your Vehicle Inspection Report (VIR) and any notices sent by DMV with you. The VIR indicates whether your car passed or failed the Smog Check inspection and includes an identification number to help DMV track your electronic certificate, if necessary.

Do I need a Smog Check if I'm planning to register my vehicle as non-operational?

No. A Smog Check is only required every other year upon registration renewal for a vehicle that the owner intends to operate in California. However, if you register a vehicle as non-operational, but then at a later time wish to bring the vehicle back to operational status, a smog inspection may be required.

What do I do if I received a "Notice of Incomplete Registration" from DMV?

DMV sends motorists this notice when it cannot locate a Smog Check certificate for a vehicle. If you receive one of these notices, you may do one of two things: (1) If you have not yet completed a Smog Check inspection, do so. Once DMV receives an electronic certificate of

compliance, the DMV database will be updated and your registration and license plate sticker will be issued. No further action is required on your part. (2) If you have already successfully completed a Smog Check, please allow 30 days to receive your registration and sticker. If, after 30 days, you still have not received your registration and license plate sticker, contact DMV for further assistance.

My renewal notice says my vehicle needs a Smog Check but the vehicle is located out of state and will not be back for many months. It's too far to bring back to California for a smog inspection. Can I get my vehicle tested in another state and send the results to DMV?

No. There is no need to get a smog inspection in another state, as it will not be valid in California. In order to complete your registration, simply fill out and sign DMV's *Statement of Facts* form stating the reason why the vehicle cannot be tested. DMV will mail the registration and license plate sticker to wherever the car is currently located.

Do I need a Smog Check if I'm selling my vehicle and recently had it tested to renew its registration in California?

California Vehicle Code section 4000.1(d)(1) specifies that a Smog Check certificate is not needed upon changing ownership if the application for transfer is submitted to DMV within 90 days of the vehicle receiving a Smog Check certificate. Therefore, if your vehicle received certification of a passing Smog Check within 90 days of the sale, another Smog Check certificate is **not** required to transfer ownership.

Who is responsible for getting a Smog Check performed when a vehicle is being sold?

California Vehicle Code section 24007(b)(2) states that it is the responsibility of the seller to provide a valid smog certificate at the time of delivery of the vehicle to the buyer.