

Top 10 Things

MINI Cooper Owners Should Know



Looking Out for You and Your Car

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Over the past few years, here at BA Auto Care (short for British American Auto Care), we have serviced quite a few MINIs. If you are the owner of a MINI Cooper, or are thinking of owning a MINI Cooper, you are a part of a special, quite eclectic group. Chances are you value cars with gas efficiency and style -- sporty, spunky “fun to drive” cars with a bit of attitude -- ones that can squeeze into those tight city spots with flair! You can get all that in a MINI, but they do have a few repair and maintenance issues you will want to be aware of.

As with all cars, following a regularly scheduled maintenance plan will help maximize the life of your vehicle. This is particularly true with MINIs, and they do have slightly higher maintenance and repair costs in the first five years of ownership as compared with similar cars on the market. Maintenance and repair costs tend to run about 15 to 40% higher than other comparable models we looked into.* But the good news is total cost of ownership isn't significantly different. That's because MINIs get such great gas mileage and tend to hold more of their value than many other makes and models. Importantly, you will want to be cautious when you are purchasing a used car and are out past the five year point. Then, how well the prior owner maintained the vehicle will be a critical factor in determining your service and repair costs.

That said, here are ten things you will want to be on the lookout for if you are interested in getting the most value from your car. We pulled the info from our [many](#) blog posts on [MINIs](#).

**Based on Kelley Blue Book 5 Year Cost to Own*



#1. Don't drive more than 5,000 miles between service intervals without checking your oil.

When we first began servicing MINI Coopers, we were shocked at the number of owners who came into the shop with extremely low oil or no oil in their engine. We couldn't figure out why this problem was occurring until finally one of our customers shared with us:

“The salesman said I can go 15,000 miles between oil changes. He said, ‘Don't worry, the computer system will tell you when to have the oil changed.’”



Well, with that statement it became clear what was happening. Most cars burn about one quart of oil every 2,000 to 3,000 miles. **If you wait 15,000 miles between oil changes, you could end up with a dangerously low engine oil level, severely impacting the life of your engine!** Unlike some BMW models which no longer even have a dipstick (and can have the same issues), MINI's do have a dipstick. So, if you are considering going for more than 5,000 miles between service intervals, be sure to check the oil.

#2. Avoid transmission issues by changing the fluid every 30,000 to 40,000 miles.

On some newer models, the manufacturer has said that their transmissions do not require fluid changes or they simply don't recommend a fluid change interval. In our experience this can be a big problem, because not changing the transmission fluid can result in early transmission failure. This is particularly true with a continuously variable transmission (CVT) installed prior to 2008. (With these CVTs, regular transmission fluid changes are actually recommended by the manufacturer.)

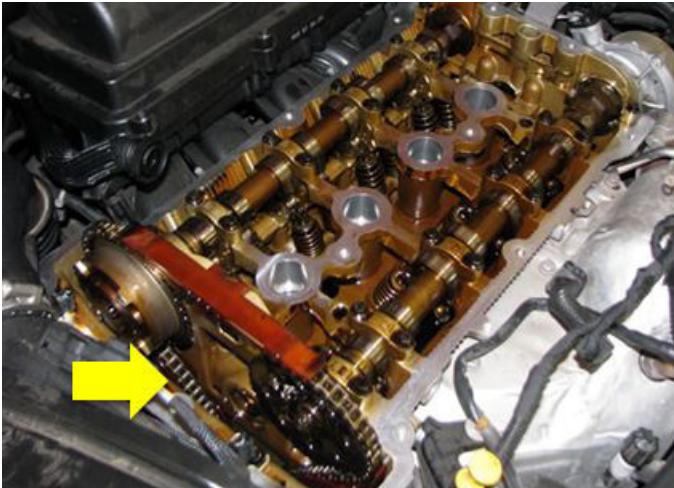
Notably, the five speed automatic transmissions installed on most MINIs today are much more reliable than on some of the older models. They may be able to go up to 50,000 miles without a change. But, if you are really looking to maximize the life of your MINI, you may want to play it safe and go with a shorter interval between transmission fluid changes. Because, after all, as many of us know, a transmission replacement is a very expensive repair.

Lifetime Transmission Fluid???

#3. Hear a rattling noise coming from your MINI? Don't ignore it, the problem could be the timing chain.

If you hear a rattling noise coming from the right side of your engine or from the front passenger side of your car, it could be the timing chain. Some cars have a timing belt; MINI's have a timing chain. (For the mechanically inclined out there, the timing chain joins the camshafts to the crank shafts. The chain runs through guides and a tensioner is used to take the slack out of the chain.)

A noise caused by a rattling timing chain is a somewhat common issue with MINI owners and the noise is typically a bit worse upon starting the car.



If you experience this problem (i.e. hear a rattling noise), it's important to check it out as early as possible, because if the timing chain actually comes loose and jumps, it will destroy the engine. And, this may or may not be covered by the manufacturer. What's more, repair costs can exceed \$2,000, so it is not a problem you want to ignore. If you experience a rattling noise, complete our [Noise, Vibration & Harshness](#) diagnostic form to help your auto technician identify the cause of the problem.

#4. MINI electric power steering pump failures are not uncommon.

We see a lot of MINI owners, particularly those with older model vehicles, come in with power steering pump failures. When you have a power steering failure, it's pretty obvious because suddenly the steering wheel becomes extremely difficult to turn.

With MINIs this failure is often caused by a problem with the cooling fan, so it's a good idea to have the cooling fan checked out while you're having the power steering pump replaced. Unlike some other vehicles, the MINI Cooper S uses a power steering pump that, rather than being driven by the engine, is driven by an electric motor. This motor is kept cool by a cooling fan. If the cooling fan isn't working properly, then you're likely to have a problem with the electric power steering pump. That's why it's so important to figure out what caused the power steering pump failure and address it. We've heard of instances where people have replaced the pump three times because they failed to get at the root cause of the problem.

You can expect a steering pump replacement to cost about \$800, but the price tag can vary significantly depending on what other things may be wrong, what your auto shop includes with the package deal, or what actually caused the failure.



Photo courtesy of Tracy Cannon's photo stream.

#5. Early clutch failures can be linked to hard use.

This problem seems to occur particularly with earlier MINI models, but the bottom line is that MINI Coopers can be subject to early clutch failures. When we speak to drivers, it seems that the problem can be linked to hard use.

It's a difficult problem to detect early on because the problem can happen slowly. As a driver, you can become accustomed to the change in how the clutch operates -- just because it happens so slowly.

What you'll want to do is:

#1.

Go easy on the clutch when driving. Yes the MINIs can be fun to drive, but don't overdo it.

#2.

If you notice a burning smell, slipping clutch, or pedal that requires significant effort when pressing, bring the car in to have it checked out by your auto technician. There's a possibility that a complete clutch failure can be avoided.

#6. Consider replacing the water pump and thermostat around 50,000 miles.

If you replace the water pump and thermostat housing before you have a leak, you can save a significant amount in labor costs. This is because once there is a coolant leak, your auto repair shop will need to diagnose the source of the leak, thus incurring higher labor charges.

If your car is running hot, you can check for a leak by checking the car's coolant level, or checking the ground under the car for a coolant leak. You don't want to overlook a problem like this, as the coolant system is responsible for helping to keep the engine cool and to avoid overheating. If your engine does overheat, just pull over, and have your car towed to your local auto shop.



#7. Exercise caution when maneuvering around high curbs or bumps as you can easily damage the front radiator support.

In MINI Coopers, the front radiator support is made from plastic. This plastic supports the radiator, the fan, and the condenser. It sits very low and it doesn't take much to damage the support. A small impact from a high curb, parking lot barrier or from a bad pothole can cause significant damage. Additionally, one of the coolant hoses sits even lower and if hit, can result in quite a bit of damage. So, the advice for MINI owners is:

Exercise caution.
Avoid high curbs & bumps!

#8. Some MINI Cooper owners run into operational problems with their doors and windows.

We have found the following problems occur somewhat frequently with MINI Coopers:

1. The door can't be opened from the inside.
2. The window slips off track and needs to be adjusted.
3. The door handle/catch is defective.

If you find one (or more) of these problems occur with your MINI Cooper, rest assured, you aren't alone. The process for identifying what's causing the problem is fairly simple, and chances are it can be fixed rather easily. If you are a "do-it-yourselfer" check out the MINI forums. Otherwise, just have your auto technician diagnose and correct the problem.



#9. You may run into some performance issues related to variable valve timing (VVT).

The VVT system allows the valve timing to change with changes in engine RPM. This results in improved fuel economy, improved overall performance and better emissions performance. The VVT system requires a good flow of oil for peak performance. Unfortunately, if the oil isn't changed as often as it should be, sludgy buildup can occur and block tiny passages. When this occurs, you'll run into performance issues.

Sometimes all that's needed is an oil change to improve performance. The detergents in the oil can help to clean the passages if they aren't completely blocked.

The best way to avoid this problem is by following tip #1 and making sure to adhere to a regular preventive maintenance schedule.



Photo courtesy of Kevin Stephenson's photo stream.

#10. The direct injection engines used in MINI Coopers can suffer from carbon build-up on the intake valves. Don't wait too long between preventive maintenance services.

This is another issue that can be avoided by getting your car serviced on schedule. If you wait too long between preventive maintenance services, the piston rings in your car's engine can begin to gum up. When this happens there is an increase in the level of combustion fumes that come in contact with the intake valve. This results in carbon build-up. Drivers notice the problem because they begin to have drivability issues like hesitation, engine misfires, skips, turbocharger issues or damage to the catalytic converter.

As noted, the best way to avoid this is by having your car serviced every 5,000 miles. You can also try adding BG Products MOA. It's an oil additive that protects your engine. Some people also theorize that using premium gasoline helps avoid this problem.

If this does happen to you, the problem can be corrected by either cleaning the piston rings or cleaning the intake valves. Get more details on this issue by checking out our blog post: [5 Q&A's: Intake Valve Carbon Build-up, Direct Injection, and MINI Coopers.](#)

To wrap it all up, it all comes down to ensuring your car or the car you are purchasing is/has been properly maintained. If you are considering a used car, be sure to review the maintenance records and spend the money to get it checked out by an auto technician you trust.

Even with proper maintenance, you can run into a few issues with your MINI, but chances are you'll catch them earlier and spend a lot less in the long run!

Still have questions? Stop by BA Auto Care in Columbia, Maryland for a cup of coffee and a free consultation.

HAPPY
MINI MOTORING!





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