

What the Check Engine Light Really Costs

National Data on America's Most Common Car Repairs — and Why the Same Problem Keeps Topping the List

Prepared by Freehome Service Center | Cumming, Georgia

Data Sources: CarMD Vehicle Health Index, 2020-2026 Editions | CarMD State Car Repair Cost Ranking | S&P Global Mobility Vehicle Age Data | Federal OBD-II Diagnostic Standards

\$554

average cost to fix a check engine light issue in 2025 — a record high, up 33% from 2024 (CarMD)

\$1,348

average cost to replace a catalytic converter — the single most common check engine light repair

8 of 10 years

the oxygen sensor has ranked as the most common check engine light repair since CarMD began tracking

Top 5

Georgia ranked among the most expensive states in the U.S. for check engine light repairs

BOTTOM LINE

Every year since 2011, CarMD has published the most comprehensive national dataset on check engine light repairs in the country, drawn from tens of millions of vehicles. The 2026 edition found the average repair cost hit a record \$554 in 2025 — up 33% in a single year, driven by labor costs rising 51% and parts costs rising 23%. But the more important finding is what keeps showing up at the top of the list year after year: a catalytic converter replacement, averaging roughly \$1,348, and the oxygen sensor failure that so often precedes it. This isn't random bad luck striking different drivers each year — it's the same predictable failure pattern playing out across the national vehicle fleet, one small, inexpensive part at a time, until it becomes an expensive one.

Executive Summary

The check engine light is one of the most misunderstood warnings on a dashboard — often dismissed as a nuisance, sometimes ignored entirely, and rarely understood for what it actually represents: a real-time diagnostic signal built into every vehicle sold in the U.S. since 1996 under the federally mandated OBD-II standard. CarMD.com has published the Vehicle Health Index, the industry's most comprehensive annual analysis of check engine light-related repairs, since 2011, drawing on diagnostic data from tens of millions of vehicles reported by technicians and vehicle owners nationwide.

This report walks through what more than a decade of that data shows: how much the average repair costs today and how sharply that's risen, which specific problem shows up at the top of the list nearly every single year, the documented connection between two of the most common repairs, and how Georgia specifically compares to the rest of the country on repair costs. It closes with what this pattern means for how drivers should actually respond the next time that light comes on.

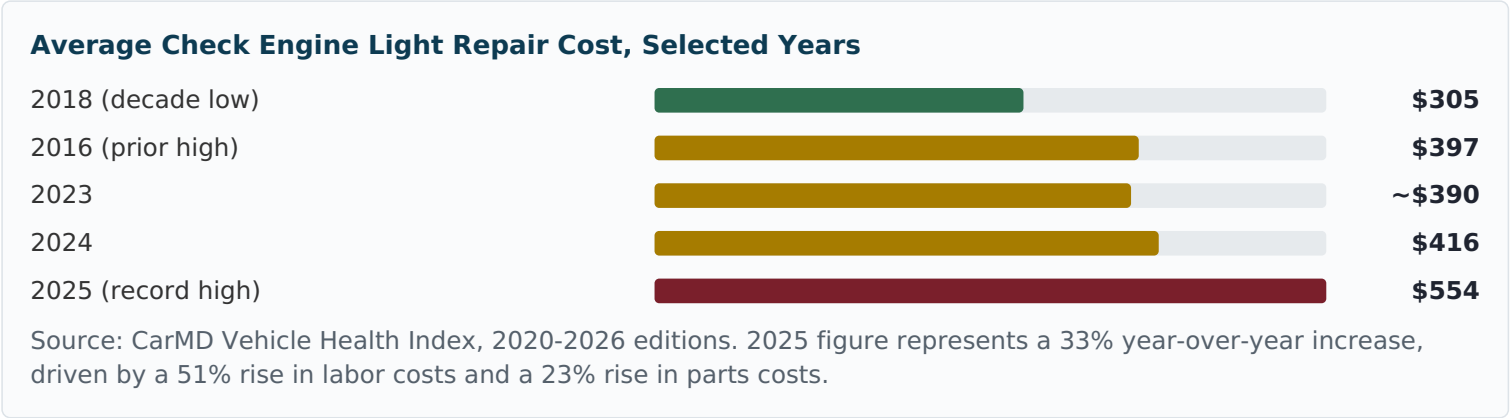
Finding 1 | The Average Check Engine Light Repair Just Hit a Record High

CarMD's 2026 Vehicle Health Index, covering calendar year 2025 repair data, found the average cost to address a check engine light climbed to \$554 — a record high and a 33% increase over the prior year. CarMD

Labor costs up 51%. Parts costs up 23%. Combined average: \$554, a new record.

attributes the increase to a sharp rise in both major cost components: labor costs rose 51%, driven by more time-intensive procedures and increasingly complex vehicle systems, while parts costs rose 23%, driven by material pricing, multi-component repairs, and in some cases the cost of imported components. This single-year jump follows a decade in which the average check engine light repair had generally ranged between roughly \$305 (the lowest point, in 2018) and \$397 (the prior high point, in 2016) — meaning the 2025 figure represents a genuinely new tier of cost, not just a continuation of a familiar trend.

CarMD directly connects this cost increase to the same aging-vehicle trend documented elsewhere in this research series: as more drivers hold onto vehicles well past the point they might have traded them in a decade ago, the national fleet skews older, and older vehicles are more prone to the kind of check engine light issues — worn sensors, aging emissions components — that tend to be both more common and more expensive to fix.



Finding 2 | The Same Problem Tops the List Almost Every Year: The Catalytic Converter

Across CarMD's most recent reporting years, "replace catalytic converter" has consistently ranked as the single most common check engine light-related repair in the country, with an average cost that has climbed from \$1,008 in 2010 to \$1,375 in 2019 to \$1,348 in the most recent 2026 report — consistently the most expensive item on the annual top-10 list by a wide margin. Catalytic converters are costly to replace largely because of the precious metals (platinum, palladium, and rhodium) used in their construction, which has also driven a rise in catalytic converter theft in recent years as scrap metal values have climbed.

Catalytic converter replacement: \$1,348 average — and the most common CEL repair for multiple years running

CarMD's data specifically notes that catalytic converter failure is "a pricey repair most often seen on aging or not well-maintained vehicles" — directly tying this repair to the two themes threaded throughout this research series: an aging national vehicle fleet, and the gap between routine maintenance and what happens when it's deferred.

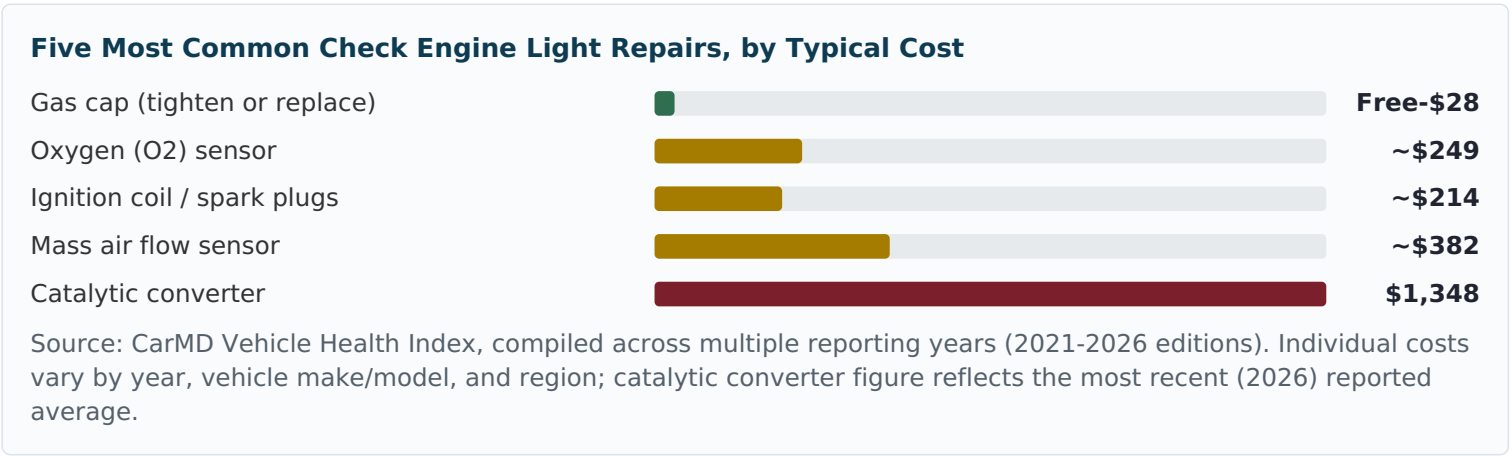
Finding 3 | The O2 Sensor Connection: How a Small Problem Becomes a Big One

The second-most-telling finding in CarMD's data is what typically comes just before a catalytic converter fails. The oxygen (O2) sensor has ranked as the single most common check engine light repair for eight of the ten years in CarMD's published history — and CarMD's own reporting describes it as "a common precursor to catalytic converter failures." This is a direct, independently documented confirmation of a pattern Freehome Service Center's own technicians have described from firsthand experience: a failing O2 sensor allows extra, unmetered fuel into the combustion cycle, and that excess

The oxygen sensor has ranked as the most common check engine light repair in 8 of the last 10 years CarMD has tracked

fuel gradually damages the catalytic converter it flows through next — turning what would have been a modest sensor replacement into one of the single most expensive repairs a vehicle can need.

The rounding out of the five most common check engine light triggers nationally — catalytic converter, oxygen sensor, ignition coil and spark plug issues, a loose or faulty gas cap, and a mass air flow sensor — spans a wide range of severity and cost, from a gas cap that can sometimes be fixed by simply tightening it, to a catalytic converter replacement running well over \$1,000. The common thread across nearly all of them: none of them get less expensive by waiting.



Finding 4 | Georgia Ranks Among the Most Expensive States for Car Repair

CarMD's state-level cost rankings, published as a companion analysis to the national Vehicle Health Index, found Georgia among the five most expensive states in the country for check engine light-related repairs, alongside Connecticut (the single most expensive state), Colorado, California, and the District of Columbia. The most frequently diagnosed repair across all five of the most expensive states, including Georgia, was the same one identified nationally: catalytic converter replacement. By contrast, the least expensive states for the same repairs clustered in the Midwest, including Maine, Ohio, Michigan, Iowa, and Wisconsin.

For Georgia drivers, this state-level data reinforces the national pattern with a specific local edge: not only is the average national repair cost climbing, but Georgia specifically tends to run above that already-rising national average — meaning deferred maintenance carries a somewhat higher downside risk for a Georgia vehicle owner than it would for a driver in many other parts of the country.

Finding 5 | Nearly Half of Drivers Are Ignoring a Warning Light Right Now

CarMD's research has also tracked driver behavior directly, and the pattern is consistent with the deferred-maintenance theme running through this research series: a recent CarMD study found nearly half of drivers currently have a dashboard warning light illuminated, and the organization's own reporting notes that more drivers are ignoring dashboard warning lights over time, even as the cost to eventually address those issues continues to climb. A check engine light that stays on doesn't just risk a bigger repair bill — CarMD notes it also typically means the vehicle will fail a state emissions test and is very likely getting worse fuel economy in the meantime, adding an ongoing cost on top of whatever the eventual repair ends up costing.

What This Means for Cumming and Forsyth County Drivers

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Don't wait to find out which of the "top 5" your check engine light represents.
- Given how wide the cost range runs — from a free gas cap tightening to a \$1,348 catalytic converter — the only way to know which end of that range applies is a proper diagnostic, not guesswork based on how the car feels to drive.

2 Treat an O2 sensor code as urgent, not optional.

Given CarMD's own documented link between oxygen sensor failure and catalytic converter damage, addressing an O2 sensor code promptly is one of the clearest, most data-backed ways to avoid turning a roughly \$250 repair into one costing over \$1,300.

3 Budget with Georgia's above-average repair costs in mind.

Since Georgia has ranked among the more expensive states for these specific repairs, a Georgia vehicle owner deferring a check engine light issue is deferring against a cost baseline that already runs higher than much of the country.

4 A record-high national average is a reason to catch problems earlier, not a reason to assume repairs are now unaffordable.

With repair costs climbing sharply, the gap between an early, targeted fix and a late, cascading one (like the O2 sensor/catalytic converter pattern in Finding 3) only grows more consequential — making prompt diagnosis more financially important than ever, not less.

The Data: Check Engine Light Repair Reference

Data Point	Figure	Source
Average check engine light repair cost, 2025 (record high)	\$554	CarMD Vehicle Health Index, 2026 edition
Year-over-year increase in average repair cost	33%	CarMD Vehicle Health Index, 2026 edition
Year-over-year increase in labor costs	51%	CarMD Vehicle Health Index, 2026 edition
Year-over-year increase in parts costs	23%	CarMD Vehicle Health Index, 2026 edition
Decade-low average repair cost (2018)	\$305	CarMD Vehicle Health Index, 10-year retrospective
Most common CEL repair, most years tracked	Catalytic converter replacement	CarMD Vehicle Health Index, multiple editions
Average catalytic converter replacement cost (2026 report)	\$1,348	CarMD Vehicle Health Index, 2026 edition
Years oxygen sensor ranked as most common repair	8 of 10 years tracked	CarMD Vehicle Health Index, 10-year retrospective
Possible CEL-related fixes identified by CarMD, 2010 vs. 2019	675 → 1,283 (nearly doubled)	CarMD Vehicle Health Index, 10-year retrospective
Vehicles analyzed in CarMD's 10-year retrospective	41 million+ unique vehicles	CarMD Vehicle Health Index, 10-year retrospective
Georgia's rank among most expensive states for CEL repairs	Top 5 (with CT, CO, CA, DC)	CarMD State Car Repair Cost Ranking
Drivers currently ignoring a dashboard warning light	Nearly half	CarMD Vehicle Health Index, 2024 edition
Average U.S. vehicle age (context)	~12.6-13 years	S&P Global Mobility, cited in CarMD 2026 report

All figures reflect national or state-level averages from CarMD's published Vehicle Health Index research; individual repair costs vary by vehicle make, model, region, and specific shop. This report does not constitute a diagnosis or repair

estimate for any individual vehicle.

About Freehome Service Center

Freehome Service Center is an ASE-certified auto repair and maintenance facility serving Forsyth County and Cherokee County from Cumming, Georgia. We provide comprehensive diagnostics and repair for all makes and models, and given how directly a proper diagnosis can be the difference between a routine repair and a catastrophic one, our technicians investigate the actual cause of a check engine light rather than guessing based on symptoms alone.

Methodology, Limitations & Sources

This report is based on CarMD.com Corporation's Vehicle Health Index, an annual analysis of check engine light-related diagnostic trouble codes, repairs, and costs published since 2011, drawing on diagnostic data from tens of millions of U.S. vehicles built in or after 1996 (the model year OBD-II became federally mandated), reported by vehicle owners and automotive technicians. Figures cited reflect national and state-level averages across the specific reporting years noted; individual repair costs vary by vehicle make, model, region, and the specific shop performing the work. This report does not constitute a diagnosis, repair estimate, or maintenance recommendation for any individual vehicle.

CarMD.com Corporation. 2026 CarMD Vehicle Health Index. Record average repair cost (\$554), catalytic converter as top repair, labor/parts cost increases. Reported via CarPro and Forbes, April 2026.

CarMD.com Corporation. "CarMD Vehicle Health Index Marks 10 Years of Reporting on Check Engine Light Repair Trends." 10-year retrospective data (2011-2020), decade cost range, oxygen sensor and catalytic converter historical rankings. PR Newswire, April 2020.

CarMD.com Corporation. 2024 and 2025 CarMD Vehicle Health Index editions. Year-over-year repair cost trends, driver warning-light behavior data. PR Newswire.

CarMD.com Corporation. State Car Repair Cost Ranking. Georgia's ranking among most expensive states for check engine light repairs.

Forbes. "Study Reveals the Most Common Check Engine Issues and Repair Costs" and "Here's What Common 'Check Engine' Problems Will Cost." Reporting on CarMD's 2025 and 2026 Vehicle Health Index editions, including S&P Global Mobility average vehicle age context.