

Taking your car to the mechanic when you have MCS



Car repair shops and their staff can be really toxic. They may make your vehicle difficult to tolerate afterwards. We provide options for dealing with the situation.

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Check out the shops before making an appointment

There can be a big difference from one repair shop to the next. One can be so clean you can almost eat off the floor while another is an oily hell.

The really clean places tend to be the more expensive ones. You especially find these at car dealers or those catering to customers who don't mind paying for better service.

A less pristine place can work just fine too. Look for places that tend to keep their big doors open all day so there is a lot of ventilation and try to schedule the work for a day with good weather so the doors stay open.

A one-man shop may work very well, even the more informal “backyard” types, who may be more flexible.

Try to get recommendations from other people with MCS in the area. It can also help to drive around and eyeball the local shops.

Try to talk to the manager. This works much better in person than over the phone. They are likely to be more accommodating to a live person and you can better gauge the body language. This also gives you the opportunity to take a closer look at their setup.

Ask the manager if you can talk outside. That helps you to be more clearheaded and it also demonstrates that there is a real issue here. If the request is rejected (unlikely), then you’ll know how any further requests will be handled.

Don’t go into much detail about MCS, but just say that you are really allergic to spilled engine oil, new tires, cigarette smoke, fragrances, fabric softener, or whatever is important. MCS is not an allergy, but calling it that makes it easier for outsiders to understand the issue.

Do they work right inside big bay doors?

Many shops have big doors right in front of each work bay. This is a good setup since there will be lots of fresh air coming in.



Some shops work on cars inside the building away from the entrance doors. That is best avoided, unless it's a really clean shop.

But there are also shops that have just one entrance door into a large room with lots of work bays. These are best avoided, unless it's a really clean shop.

Some shops both have direct-access bays and bays in the back. You may try to ask to be serviced in the bays with doors.

Can they do the work outside?

A lot of work can actually be done outside, such as right in front of the open bay door. The mechanic will still have easy access to the tools and may actually enjoy the outdoors if the weather is pleasant.

Can you drive it in yourself?

If you ask, many places will let you drive the car into the bay yourself, so no mechanic ever needs to sit in the car. This can really protect the interior of your car.

There can be an insurance coverage issue here, which might make the mechanic decline the request, but I have never had that problem.

It may help any legal insurance jitters if the work can be done outdoors. If you drive it right up to the door, but not inside it, that could legally make a difference.

You will need to hang around the shop until they are finished if you want to drive your car out of the bay again. It is not reasonable for them to wait for you to come back.

Mobile mechanics

A mobile mechanic comes to your place (or a place you choose). That means the mechanic expects to do the work outside and doesn't need to drive your car anywhere.

You are just dealing with one person and it all takes place outside without you having to ask for it.

You may not even need to say anything about having MCS.

And while the work takes place, you can stay inside your safe home instead of having to wait outdoors for hours.

Using a mobile mechanic can be a lot safer than going to a shop. But such a mechanic is more limited in what work can be done and they are not available in many areas.

Asking for fragrance-free

Asking the mechanic to come to work without wearing fragrances is dicey. First of all, few people have any clue what "fragrance-free" really means, so it is unlikely even an honest effort will be effective. Many people (at least in America) will find such a request an imposition on their personal freedom to smell how they please.

An alternative is to choose a mechanic who is less stinky to start with. In a large shop, the manager may assign a mechanic who doesn't use cologne, if you ask.

Protecting the inside of your car

You can protect the inside of your car from contamination that is either airborne or rubs off anyone who sits in the car.

A mechanic sitting in your car can deposit oil, cologne, fragrances, fabric softeners, and much else. The areas in danger include:

- Driver's seat
- Driver's footwell
- Steering wheel
- Gearshift handle
- Interior door handle

If they need to test drive the vehicle, then other parts are in danger, such as seat belt, parking brake, turn signals, and other controls.

The seat and footwell can be covered with plastic or large towels. The backrest can be covered with a large trash bag.

You can hold these in place using tape, rubber bands, bungee cords, or similar. Or they may stay on their own.



Wrapped in aluminum foil and old towels, the interior is ready for the mechanic.

To protect the steering wheel and other controls, people have wrapped them in aluminum foil, cling wrap plastic and other barriers. We've even heard about someone who keeps a steering wheel cover for this purpose.

The backseat and passenger seats will not be sat in, so they can be protected just by draping an old bedsheet over them.

Whether you need to do all this or not depends on your level of sensitivity and tolerance of risk. It is probably a lot simpler if you can arrange it so the mechanic doesn't need to enter the car at all.

Keep the windows closed

Ask the mechanic to keep the windows closed at all times so toxic dust and fumes don't blow into the car.

If you will not be present when the car is driven out of the shop, consider whether to ask them to keep the windows open when it sits outside. On one hand it helps offgas the interior. On the other, toxic dust etc. may blow in from some other activity happening there.

Avoid courtesy cleaning

Some of the shops routinely vacuum the floors and wash the windows once the repair is done. Since they'll use toxic products, you'll want to avoid this.

Driving the car home after the repair

When you drive the car home afterwards, you may need to keep the windows open or wear a respirator.

If you covered the steering wheel and seats, remove the coverings before you drive.

You could put on disposable gloves in case some oil or other chemicals were deposited on the steering wheel, door handle, or controls.

Replacing the windshield

If you live in a rural area with unpaved roads, you'll likely get a cracked windshield at some point.

The glue they use to attach the new windshield is very toxic for a couple days, and then quickly becomes inert as it fully cures.

If you have to drive the car home yourself, you may need to wear a respirator and fully open the windows. Or you could hire someone to drive it home for you – perhaps hire a handyman.

In some areas, auto glass shops offer a service where they do it in your driveway so you don't need to enter your car at all until the glue has cured.

Local laws vary on when a windshield must be replaced. Some allow cracks that are not in front of the driver. Others do not allow any cracks (auto glass industry lobbyists at work).

If you catch it early, a glass shop may be able to stop a small crack from spreading. The work is done entirely from the outside.

Some people have driven their car for years with a cracked windshield. It does not seem to actually weaken the glass.

If you live in your vehicle

Going to the shop is especially dicey if it is your home they are working on, whether it is a car, van, RV, or pickup truck. You just have to be really careful to avoid contamination.

Besides covering the seats, also make sure to seal up your belongings. And really try to find a less toxic shop or one that can do the work outside.

We know one woman who was living in her van which had a breakdown while she was driving it long-distance. A towing company took her to a shop she didn't know, but the staff was very helpful and kind to her. They had to get a part before they could do the repair, so she camped in the lot next to the shop for two nights.

The story of the pressurized car

Some years ago, a major repair was needed on a car someone was living in. It was a very old car and the repair involved welding, which is particularly toxic. Major contamination of her home was quite possible.

The solution was to pressurize the car so contamination could not get inside.

What they did was set up a small and powerful air purifier right outside the bay door. They used an Austin Air Mini, which has a large zeolite filter. They connected a string of aluminum dryer exhaust hoses to the outlet of the air purifier and the other end to the car (I think it was through a window, with a plate taped to cover the rest of the slit).

This way the inside of the car was kept free of welding fumes and dust while the work was done. It worked very well; she slept in it the following night.

More information

Other articles about less toxic and low-EMF vehicles are on www.eiwellspring.org/vehicle.html