

GENERIC · POWERTRAIN

P0381

OBD-II DIAGNOSTIC TROUBLE CODE (DTC)

P0381

Glow Plug/Heater Indicator Circuit Malfunction

P0381 is a generic OBD-II code that indicates a malfunction in the glow plug indicator circuit, which is the dashboard warning lamp that tells the driver when the glow plugs are heating. The engine control module (ECM) monitors the indicator circuit and sets this code when the voltage or current on the control circuit does not match expected values, often due to a faulty bulb, wiring issue, or driver in the instrument cluster.

SYSTEM

Powertrain

CODE TYPE

Generic (all makes)

SEVERITY

Low

FIX DIFFICULTY

Intermediate

AREA

Ignition system and misfire

Symptoms you may notice

- Glow plug indicator light does not illuminate when the ignition is turned on
- Glow plug indicator light stays illuminated continuously after the engine starts
- Glow plug indicator light flashes intermittently or behaves erratically
- Often no symptoms besides the warning light, with the engine starting and running normally
- Hard starting or rough idle in cold weather if the indicator circuit fault affects glow plug operation
- Other dashboard warning lights may illuminate if the fault is related to a broader electrical issue

Common causes, most likely first

- 1 Burned out or damaged glow plug indicator bulb
- 2 Open or short circuit in the wiring between the ECM and the glow plug indicator lamp
- 3 Faulty glow plug indicator relay or control module
- 4 Corroded or loose electrical connectors at the instrument cluster or ECM
- 5 Defective instrument cluster circuit board or solder joint
- 6 Failed glow plug control module that also manages the indicator circuit
- 7 Water intrusion or physical damage to the indicator circuit harness



How to diagnose and fix it

- 1 Check the glow plug indicator bulb and replace it if burned out
- 2 Inspect the wiring and connectors between the ECM and the indicator lamp for damage or corrosion
- 3 Test the glow plug indicator relay and replace it if faulty
- 4 Use a scan tool to command the indicator lamp on and off to verify circuit operation
- 5 Check for continuity and voltage drops across the indicator circuit with a multimeter
- 6 Inspect the instrument cluster for cold solder joints or circuit board damage
- 7 If all else fails, diagnose the glow plug control module and replace if necessary

Don't overlook the simple bulb first

- A surprisingly common cause of P0381 is simply a burned-out indicator bulb, which many technicians overlook while chasing complex wiring faults.
- The code can be set by a fault in the glow plug control module even when the glow plugs themselves are functioning perfectly, so do not replace glow plugs based on this code alone.
- Some vehicles use a light-emitting diode (LED) for the glow plug indicator that is soldered into the cluster, making replacement more involved than a simple bulb swap.
- Intermittent connections at the instrument cluster can cause P0381 to set without any noticeable drivability issues, leading to misdiagnosis of the glow plug system.
- A weak battery or charging system fault can cause voltage irregularities that trigger P0381, so always verify battery health before condemning the indicator circuit.

Can I keep driving with P0381?

It is generally safe to continue driving with P0381 because the fault only affects the glow plug indicator lamp and does not impair engine operation in most cases. However, if you notice hard starting or rough running in cold weather, have the glow plug system checked promptly to avoid further issues.

Tools that help

- OBD-II scan tool
- Digital multimeter
- Test light
- Socket set
- Trim removal tools



Reading P0381

- P** Powertrain: engine, transmission and emissions.
- 0** Generic (SAE) code: it means the same thing on every OBD-II vehicle.
- 3** Ignition system and misfire.
- 81** The exact fault within that area.

Often seen with

P0380 Glow Plug/Heater Circuit A Malfunction · **P0382** Glow Plug/Heater Circuit 'B' · **P0670** Glow Plug Module Control Circuit · **P0671** Cylinder 1 Glow Plug Circuit · **P0672** Cylinder 2 Glow Plug Circuit

See it working

Watch the animated explainer [Inline-Four Engine X-Ray: Firing Order 1-3-4-2](#) on Auto Veteran to see the parts involved moving.

Full guide, related articles and animations: <https://www.autoveteran.tech/dtc-codes/p0381/>

