

Chrysler Neon



SCORECARD

Overtaking / pulling power	●●●○○
Fuel economy	●●○○○
Handling / steering	●●●○○
Comfort / ease of control	●●●○○
Interior space / practicality	●●○○○
Accident / injury avoidance	●●●○○
Costs in service	●●●○○
Depreciation prospects	●●●○○

WHEN THE NEON WAS INTRODUCED over here in 1996, it was the first US saloon to be offered in right-hand drive for a long time. Now, in Neon 2000 form, it's been given a facelift, lengthened and widened a little and been mildly modified in the chassis and engine departments.

Although rated as a "small sedan" in the States, over here it's midway in length between an Astra and a Vectra, so accommodation for those in the back is adequate rather than leg-stretching. You also sit upright with your head only a smidgin away from the back window.

Up front, the wide screen pillars are obstructive and there's an annoying reflection in the glass. Also, the minor switches are awkward to find below the radio. Fortunately, though, most switch functions are controlled by the (heavy) multi-purpose stalks.

The driver is certainly well catered for by a lavish amount of equipment, including air conditioning, ABS brakes, traction control and cruise control, and there's the option of automatic transmission at no extra charge.

This proves a popular choice with punters, and accompanies the lively but vocal-when-revved two-litre engine. There are snags, however. Because it's only a

three-speeder, its ratios are simply too few and far between. The shifts are rarely seamlessly smooth, downshifts often result in a big flurry of noisy revs, and churning losses in the torque converter take their toll of fuel consumption, particularly (and ironically) if you drive gently. As the five-speed manual has a good gearchange, think long and hard before opting for this no-cost automatic option.

The Neon drives like a sportier version of a mainstream European saloon, with alert steering, grippy, roll-resistant cornering and a taut, competent ride that is, nevertheless, never quite capable of smoothing away surface imperfections.

Stowage spaces abound, but the boot is spoilt by a high rear sill and intruding wheelarches; in compensation, the rear seatbacks fold forwards to give a long, if stepped, load deck.

This latest Neon is now better built and better packaged, but remains relatively unrefined compared with the European opposition, particularly in the automatic transmission department. To its credit, however, it's superbly equipped, has a decent warranty and is outstanding value for money.

HOW THE NEON COMPARES*	Engine cap/power (cc/bhp)	Revs at 70mph (rpm)	30-70mph through gears (sec)	30-70mph in 5th/4th gears (sec)	Fuel economy (mpg)	Brakes † best stop (m/kg)	Maximum legroom - front (cm)	Typical leg/kneeroom - rear (cm)	Steering turns/ (p) circle (m)	Overall length (cm)
CHRYSLER NEON 2.0LX (AUTO)	1996/131	3100	10.6	Auto	31	29/14	109	97/76	2.8/10.9	439
Daewoo Leganza 2.0 CDX	1998/132	3240	9.4	22.6/16.1	30	26/40	109	102/78	3.2/11.4	467
Fiat Marea 2.0 HLX	1998/147	3410	8.9	23.6/16.5	29	25/30	105	99/68	3.0/11.2	439
Ford Focus 1.8 Zetec	1796/115	3150	9.9	25.6/18.4	35½	23/32	107	100/71	2.9/10.6	436
Nissan Primera 2.0 (CVT M6)	1998/140	2600	9.1	21.1/15.5	32½	24/14	107	99/74	2.7/12.3	452
Volvo S40 2.0	1948/140	3150	10.0	26.7/18.1	33	25/23	113	99/75	2.9/10.5	448
*All rivals (except Primera) tested with five-speed manual transmission						† all with ABS			(p)all with power steering	

PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS					
	1.8		3.9		6.9
					10.6

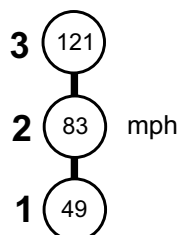
20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
SPEED RANGES USING KICKDOWN	3.7		6.8		
	3.9			7.1	

Maximum speeds

using accelerator kickdown

REVS PER MINUTE	1st/2nd 5850	3rd 5350
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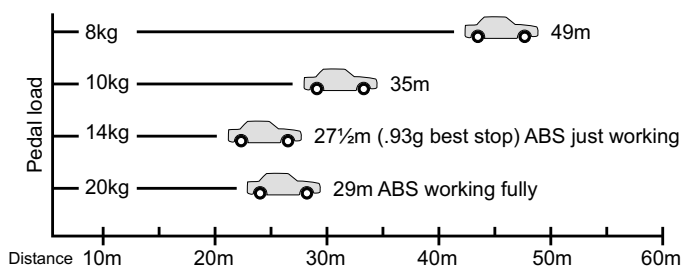
3100rpm observed at 70mph in
top gear = 22.6mph per 1000rpm



BRAKES

Pedal feel ●●●○○	Behaviour in an emergency ●●○○○	Handbrake ●●●●○
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Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (with standard ABS)
(A good-to-average best stop is about 26m at 15-20kg pedal load)

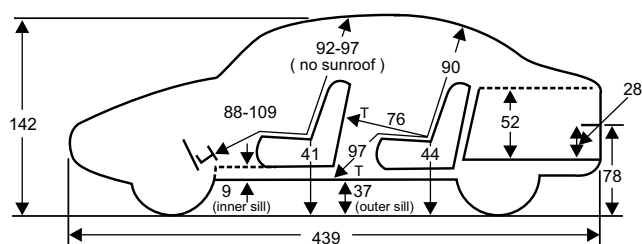


Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop:
11kg at start of test, 12kg at end of test (*Ideal brakes show no change*)

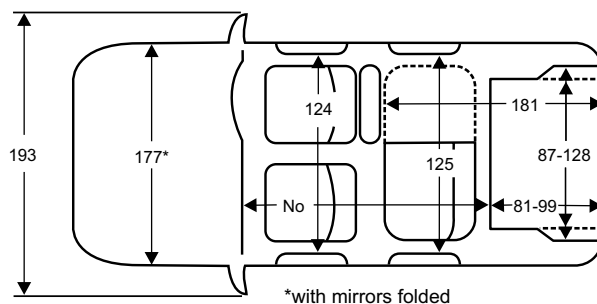
MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres

Four-door saloon



T: typical back seat space behind medium-sized front occupants



TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

Although now superseded by four- and five-speed 'boxes, two- and three-speed automatics were the mainstay of the majority of US manufacturers for many years and bore memorable epithets such as Torqueflite, Turbo Hydramatic and Powerglide.

Chrysler soldiers on with such a (three-speed) transmission that comprises a torque converter and epicyclic gears. Although it features a safety device (you can't remove the key except in Park), part-throttle kickdown and a lock-up facility to prevent slip within the fluid coupling, that's about as far as the technological sophistication goes – no "fuzzy logic" that adapts shifts to your driving style, and no sport or winter modes. Manual selection of the gears is possible, of course, by resorting to the selector lever, but most drivers will simply select D and go.

It's a cheap and cheerful transmission that Chrysler is giving away free. A four-speeder for the Neon is in the offing, but the company is being coy about its date of arrival.

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Fuel grade: unleaded Premium, 95 octane

Type of use - air conditioning off* **mpg**

In the city - heavy traffic 18

In the country - quiet driving 33

Typical mpg overall **31**

Realistic tank range† 40 litres/275 miles

† based on fuel gauge/warning lamp and filling station experience - *not* nominal tank capacity

**with air conditioning switched on, consumption will increase by 2–4% in winter and 4–8% in summer*

LIKES AND GRIPES

Clear, bold, white-faced instruments ... but reflected "haze" in screen from light facia trim

Car's width helped by electric fold-back mirrors ... but you have to guess whereabouts of nose and tail

Excellent front headroom ... but poor rear headroom

Driver's left footrest on automatic model ... but not on the manual

Retractable rear head restraints ... but they don't raise high enough for safety

Rear kneeroom is quite generous ... but CD changer steals all nearside footspace

