

MacBook Pro batteries experiencing failure

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No one ever said change would be without incident or event. Amid Apple Computer's 2006 transition of its product lines to Intel components, several users have reported horror stories of batteries holding less than their normal charge, overheating and swelling to larger sizes in recently purchased MacBook Pro laptop computers. In certain extraordinary cases, the batteries have been compared to appearing as if they've suffered internal explosions, yet continued operating.

The batteries, apparently storing excess heat, are among the first generation of Apple Computer's Intel-component-based laptop computer line. To date, these computers have been lauded as running at faster speeds and cooler temperatures than their PowerPC-based predecessors.

Though perhaps isolated to a select batch or group of batteries, other problems have been reported such as laptop units randomly shutting



down while operating on battery, requiring connections to AC power via the included power cord or failing within a few weeks after erratic behavior began.

Individual cells on the batteries have also been reported as failing in some instances, the current technology employing three functioning power cells per battery. Failure within one of those cells can reduce the battery's potential functionality and lead to overall failure over time.

To date, Apple has handled the battery repairs and replacements on a case-by-case basis but has yet to admit to a wide-scale issue.

"There's potential for a gremlin or two to sneak in there," said Michel Gartenberg, an analyst for Jupiter Research, a business analysis firm. "We're not hearing about a widespread problem or widespread dissatisfaction, but the important thing is for Apple to follow up on it appropriately or quickly.

"I've heard of situations in which you have certain batteries or products, AC adapters or early runs of the machine. It wouldn't surprise me that early adopters are having problems with machines made in the first production run," Gartenberg said.

Feedback from customers who had batteries repaired or replaced placed the blame within the manufacturing process. A purported excess amount of thermal paste, which helps the computer dissipate heat properly through cooling fans and the heat pipe system, may have contributed to the problem, allowing an excess amount of heat to feed back into the battery despite the typically lower heat output of the new Intel components.

Other comments have pointed to errors within a batch of batteries themselves.



"I didn't experience swelling. ... I had a cutoff issue with the battery. When it got between 25 percent and 33 percent of remaining battery life, the computer would just power off," said Jason O'Grady, editor of O'Grady's PowerPage, a popular Macintosh news site and blogger for ZDNet's Apple page. "No warning, data was lost, the whole bit."

Despite agreeing that too much thermal paste was applied to the design, O'Grady's experience led him to believe that the problems lay within the batteries themselves, as his original battery failed and the replacements have worked correctly since he received them. In calls placed to Apple tech support, support personnel have paid close attention to the serial numbers of the failed batteries prior to instructing customers to send the units in for replacement.

"The machines are very, very fast and excel considering the price per performance ratio," O'Grady said. "The speed and ability to also run Windows far outweigh issues such as battery problems."

O'Grady then suggested that Apple, which is renowned for its secrecy regarding new and upcoming products, could avoid similar troubles with first-generation hardware by testing them with larger focus groups. The MacBook Pro machines, though groundbreaking, may have only been placed in a small test group prior to release.

In what may be considered a quiet response to part of the problem, Apple recently released a firmware update for the 17" MacBook Pro model that adjusts fan cycles within the unit, allowing it to operate at cooler temperatures. While this may not be equivalent to a widespread or focused recall of certain battery units, it may be the company's way of gradually addressing the larger issue.

An Apple Computer representative was unavailable for comment.



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