

15-Passenger Vans Require Special Safety Precautions

HOW CAN YOU AVOID ROLLOVERS?

If your ministry uses 15-passenger vans, you should be aware of multiple advisory warnings issued by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

According to the traffic safety agency, a 15-passenger van fully loaded with passengers and drivers has a significantly increased risk of rolling over under certain conditions. Because of this, ministries need to pay greater attention to passenger loads, tire maintenance, and road conditions. In addition, driver experience is essential.

Today, the NHTSA requires all new 15-passenger vans to have electronic stability control (ESC) systems, which can reduce the rollover risk. Be aware that models produced before 2004 likely don't have this crash prevention technology.

DESIGNED FOR CARGO

Fifteen-passenger vans were designed to carry cargo and were later fitted as passenger vehicles. Because of their original design, they don't comply with many of the safety requirements that apply to passenger cars or school buses. Your ministry should be aware of the following safety issues associated with using these vans as passenger transportation.

HANDLING. When more than 10 people occupy the van, the passenger weight raises the center of gravity and shifts it to the rear. This makes 15-passenger vans more likely to overturn in an emergency. Also, because these vans are substantially longer and wider than cars, they require more space for changing lanes and more time for braking.

TRACTION. Most 15-passenger vans have single rather than dual rear wheels. This means they don't have enough rear traction when fully loaded to safely perform emergency steering maneuvers. A sharp turn in an emergency could cause rear tire slide, or fishtailing.

GLASS. The glass used in 15-passenger vans raises another safety concern. Most passenger vehicles use laminated glass, but many of these vans use tempered glass, which is less likely to keep occupants from being thrown out of the vehicle during a collision. (Continued page 2)

PRECAUTIONS TO TAKE

If your ministry uses 15-passenger vans, you may be able to reduce the risk of accidents by following these precautions:

- **INSPECT TIRES.** Inspect the tires and check tire pressure before each use to make sure they're properly inflated and that the tread isn't worn down. Excessively worn or improperly inflated tires can increase the likelihood of a rollover. Avoid using old spare tires, since even unused tires weaken with age.
- **SCREEN DRIVERS.** Screen drivers before they get behind the wheel. Choose experienced drivers who are properly licensed and have safe driving records.
- **REQUIRE TRAINING.** Make training, specifically in the use of 15-passenger vans, a requirement for drivers, and have them repeat the training every two or three years. The National Safety Council (www.nsc.org) offers classroom training in van safety.
- **REQUIRE SEATBELTS.** Require occupants to wear seat belts always. Create a written policy to this effect, and make drivers responsible for enforcing it. An unrestrained 15-passenger van occupant is about three times as likely to die in a single-vehicle crash as one wearing a seat belt.
- **REMOVE REAR SEAT.** Remove the rear seat to make sure that passengers sit in front of the rear axle, and load occupants from the front.
- **LIMIT OCCUPANTS.** Take no more than nine occupants.
- **PREVENT OVERLOADING.** Keep the rear area free of as much luggage or equipment as possible to prevent overloading. Carry nothing on the roof and don't tow anything behind the van.
- **BAN NIGHT DRIVING.** Drivers need to be rested and attentive to driving at all times. Ban the use of vans between midnight and 6 a.m. The combination of driver fatigue and poor visibility after dark can be dangerous, even deadly.
- **AVOID CELL PHONE USE.** Cell phone use by the driver while the van is in motion should be prohibited.
- **LIMIT DRIVE TIME.** Prohibit each driver from operating the vans for more than 8 hours in any 24-hour period. Have more than one qualified driver for trips of more than 6 hours, and have them rotate shifts every 2 hours.
- **WATCH SPEED.** Drive at a safe speed based on driving conditions. The driver should never exceed the posted speed limit and should always slow down if roads are wet or icy, since these vehicles do not respond well to abrupt steering maneuvers.

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PRIORITIZE TIRE SAFETY

Tire failures have been implicated in many fatal rollovers of 15-passenger vans. NHTSA research has found that tires on 15-passenger vans are often underinflated and are being used past their service life.

Aged tires are more prone to fail, even if they appear to be new (such as original spare tires). Some manufacturers recommend that tires be replaced every six years, regardless of tread depth. Many manufacturers say that 10 years is the maximum service life for tires.

CHECK TIRE AGE

To determine tire age, check the Department of Transportation serial code stamped on either the inside or outside wall of the tire. Look for the letters “DOT” on the sidewall. Next, you’ll find a code of up to 12 numbers and letters. The last three or four numbers tell you the week and year the tire was manufactured. Look on both the outside and inside walls of the tire, since the numbers may be printed on only one side.

Tires with three-digit codes were manufactured before 2000; tires with 4-digit codes were manufactured in 2000 or later. The first two digits indicate the week a tire was manufactured; the last digits indicate the year. Therefore, the code 0110 would indicate a tire manufactured in the first week of 2010; 1210 means the tire was manufactured in the 12th week of the year 2010 (March, not December). The number 529 means the tire was made in the last week of 1999.

While the NHTSA hasn’t issued a recommendation on tire “expiration dates,” it is developing a proposal to require manufacturers to conduct an “aging test” on tires to predict their future performance.

In the meantime, check the manufacture date of your ministry vehicles’ tires and consider replacing them if they’re more than six to 10 years old, regardless of how much tread is left.

For more information on safety concerns involving 15-passenger vans, consult www.safercar.gov or www.nhtsa.gov.

Note: Federal law prohibits using 15-passenger vans for the school-related transport of students unless they meet all the same safety requirements as school buses.



We would like to thank our corporate partner, Brotherhood Mutual, for being a valuable resource for this article.

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