

SAFETY BULLETIN

15-PASSENGER VAN SAFETY



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Passenger vans are a unique and dangerous breed of vehicle. While their appealing seating capacity makes it convenient to transport groups of people from place to place, their design makes them inherently dangerous. 15-passenger van's center of gravity is high, which means that rollovers can occur at only 35 miles per hour. Research has shown that 15-passenger vans have a rollover risk that increases dramatically as the number of occupants increases from fewer than five to more than 10.

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When you add 10 or more people, the weight distribution only increases the rollover risk if the driver needs to turn sharply to avoid an obstacle in the road. SafetyForum reports that "Overall, the vans were three times more likely to roll over in a crash when loaded with 10 or more passengers than when they carried fewer than five." They also claim, "When vans are fully loaded, single wheels do not provide adequate rear traction to perform emergency steering maneuvers without fishtailing." Because of their inherent risk and propensity to rollover, school use of these vans is prohibited by law in most states.

ENSURING PASSENGER SAFETY AND PREVENTING ROLLOVERS

The biggest safety factor in providing passenger safety is being able to prevent rollovers. Rollovers can occur when the large, high-center-of-gravity van begins to fishtail. If the driver cannot regain control of the vehicle, then a rollover is imminent. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) says the following things can cause these awkward vehicles to fishtail and rollover:

- "The van goes off a rural road. If this occurs, the van is likely to overturn when it strikes a ditch or embankment or when it is tripped by an object or runs onto soft soil."
- "The driver is fatigued or driving too fast for conditions. A tired driver can doze off and lose control. The driver can also lose control when traveling at a high speed causing the van to slide sideways off the road. The grassy or dirt medians that line highways can often cause the van to overturn when the tires dig into the dirt."
- "The driver overcorrects the steering as a panic reaction to an emergency or to a wheel dropping off the pavement. Especially at freeway speeds, this situation can cause the driver to lose control, resulting in the van sliding sideways and rolling over."

15-PASSENGER VAN SAFETY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are safety recommendations if an organization chooses to use 15-passenger vans:

- **Experienced Drivers:** Because 15-passenger vans handle much differently than a car, they should only be driven by experienced, licensed drivers who operate this type of vehicle on a regular basis.
- **Speed:** Always obey posted speed limits and reduce speed as weather and road conditions dictate. 15-passenger vans require additional braking time and cannot handle abrupt maneuvers the way cars can.
- **Seat Belts:** All occupants must wear seat belts at all times. An unrestrained 15-passenger van occupant is four times more likely to be killed than a restrained occupant.
- **Tire Pressure:** The van's tires, including the spare tire, need to be properly inflated and the tread should not be worn down. Excessively worn or improperly inflated tires can lead to a loss of vehicle control and possibly a rollover.
- **Occupancy:** Never allow more than 15 people to ride in a 15-passenger van. Fill the seats from front to back, and when the van is not full, passengers should sit in the seats that are in front of the rear axle.
- **Cargo:** Cargo should be placed forward of the rear axle. Never overload the van or place loads on the roof of the van.
- **Exposure Avoidance:** Using other vehicles that are less likely to roll over and have a better safety record should be considered.

CONCLUSION

While 15-passenger vans can be convenient, their design can pose safety risks to inexperienced drivers. The best risk management strategy as it pertains to 15-passenger vans is exposure avoidance; meaning to the extent possible, you should avoid using them. If your organization chooses to use them, you will need to alert your van drivers of the serious risks inherent when driving these vehicles, and ensure they are properly trained.

If you or your staff have any questions concerning this important Safety Bulletin, please contact us today.



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