

15 - PASSENGER VANS BEST PRACTICES

Across industry lines, 15-passenger vans can be useful for transporting groups of people. However, these vehicles also carry unique risks. Recent research from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) found that 15-passenger vans are more likely to be involved in single-vehicle rollover crashes (a type of crash that results in the vehicle being tipped on its side or roof) than other types of vehicles.

With this in mind, it's crucial for your organization to take steps to mitigate the risks that come with operating 15-passenger vans. Whether your organization utilizes a single van or an entire fleet of this type of vehicle, review the following guidance for an outline of the most common safety hazards associated with 15-passenger vans and risk management steps that you can implement to avoid these hazards.

Key Safety Hazards

According to NHTSA research, 15-passenger vans can carry the following safety hazards on the road:

Higher Fatality Risks

Because 15-passenger vans can hold more people, they can contribute to a higher number of fatalities in the event of a crash. What's more, the risk of a rollover increases with each additional occupant in the van.

Speed Concerns

Driving at high speeds can be significantly more dangerous in large vehicles. The likelihood of a 15-passenger van rolling over increases fivefold on roads with a speed limit that's above 50 mph.

Road Curvatures

Driving on curved roads can also be a more hazardous feat in a larger vehicle. The odds of a 15-passenger van rolling over on a curved road is double that of the risk on a straight road.

Heavy Loads

Passenger vans have a center of gravity that shifts up and to the back. That being said, the heavier the load—whether passengers or cargo—the greater the risk of rollover.

Underinflated Tires

An NHTSA study found that over 70% of 15-passenger vans had at least one under inflated tire. Driving with under inflated tires increases the risk of a blowout occurring, which can cause a driver to lose control of the vehicle and potentially lead to a rollover incident.

Poor Weather Conditions

As with any vehicle, adverse weather can lead to reduced visibility and slippery road conditions—both of which increase the risk of being involved in a crash.

Reducing the Risk

Despite these safety hazards, there are a variety of steps that your organization can take to reduce the risks of operating 15-passenger vans. Consider the following guidance:

Enforce Passenger Safety

Never allow more than 15 occupants within a 15-passenger van. Have passengers fill the van from front to back. If the van is not fully occupied, have passengers sit only in forward-facing seats in front of the rear axle to increase vehicle stability. If possible, remove the rear seat. Further, require passengers to wear their seat belts at all times.

Select Skilled Drivers

Only allow competent, experienced drivers to operate your 15-passenger van(s). Drivers who possess a commercial driver's license are ideal candidates. In addition, review all candidates' driver history before letting them operate your vehicle(s). In many cases, your state or insurance company may impose restrictions on who is permitted to operate a 15-passenger van.

Implement a Driver Training Program

Even skilled drivers need routine training. Your training program should include the following safety recommendations for 15-passenger van operations:

- Conduct a pre-trip inspection and address any safety or maintenance concerns before each journey.
- Drive in the right-hand lane whenever possible.
- In good weather conditions, keep at least a four-second following distance behind other traffic. In poor conditions, keep at least a six-second following distance.
- Avoid being in other vehicles' blind spots as much as possible and avoid backing up as much as possible.
- Always obey the speed limit and consider driving under the speed limit if needed (e.g., in poor weather conditions or heavy traffic).
- Exercise extra caution on steep or curved roads.
- Take all turns slowly. Remember that 15-passenger vans can't handle abrupt maneuvers.
- Avoid panicked steering and hard braking. If an emergency occurs on the road, slow down and pull over in a safe manner as soon as possible.
- Distribute passengers and cargo evenly on the left and right sides of the vehicle. Place cargo in front of the rear axle. Insist that passengers sit toward the front of the vehicle if possible and wear their seat belts.
- Don't overload the vehicle with passengers or cargo. Never load items on top of the vehicle.
- Always stay focused on the road. Never use a handheld device while driving, and limit conversation with passengers. Avoid driving when fatigued.

Keep Weight in Mind

Consult the vehicle owner's manual for the maximum passenger and cargo weight, as well as the maximum towing capability. Never allow drivers to exceed these limits.

Be Prepared

Make sure each vehicle has an emergency kit. This kit should include a spare tire, wheel wrench, tripod jack, flares or triangle reflectors, toolbox, first-aid kit, blanket, flashlight and extra batteries.

Conduct Regular Maintenance

Be sure to inspect your 15-passenger vans regularly for wear and tear. Pay special attention to the brakes, steering, seat belts and tires (this includes making sure the tires are fully inflated). Conduct routine maintenance and make replacements as needed.

Have the Right Policies in Place

Ensure your organization has policies on safe driving, substance abuse, distracted driving, accident reporting and vehicle maintenance in place.

Comply with State Laws

Keep in mind that the state you are operating your vehicle(s) in might have specific standards for 15-passenger van usage. Be sure to check your state's department of transportation website for specific regulations.

Secure the Right Insurance

Work with your Risk Manager to ensure the organization has adequate insurance that accounts for the risks associated with operating 15-passenger vans.