



## Chance of rollover greater in big vans

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By Jeff Plungis / The Detroit News

**DETROIT** -- Full-size passenger vans pose a greater risk of rolling over than smaller vans when fully loaded, federal safety regulators said in a new study raising more concerns about the safety of light trucks.

The study by National Highway Traffic Safety Administration researchers -- conducted in response to several high-profile accidents involving college athletes -- sparked a major debate inside the agency about how to interpret the results and whether they should be released.

The study was completed last July but the findings were only presented Monday at the Society of Automotive Engineers' 2001 World Congress.

NHTSA officials didn't offer any solutions to the safety issues raised by the study.

NHTSA researcher W. Riley Garrott said it was clear that passenger vans that can carry up to 15 passengers were more likely to be involved in rollover accidents and fatal rollover accidents than smaller vans or minivans.

Further, it appeared that the rollover dangers increased when the vans were carrying full loads.

The vans were 17 percent more likely to be involved in a rollover crash than smaller vans when they were carrying between one and four passengers.

When they were carrying 15 passengers, it went up to 35 percent. For 16 or more passengers, it was 70 percent.

The safety agency was able to show through road tests that the vehicles were more likely to tip over in the face of specific driving maneuvers like sharp turns.

The road tests also showed that the vehicles, when fully loaded, were a lot more difficult to handle. That raises safety issues because no special training is required to operate the vehicles, such as the commercial driver's license that truck, limousine or taxi drivers have to obtain.

The vans are often used by church and school groups, and the driver could be a parishioner, coach or student unfamiliar with the special cautions that should be exercised.

There were five fatal crashes involving 15-passenger vans owned by colleges between December 1999 and February 2000. A Kenyon College basketball player was killed in a rollover crash in January 2000. Four Prairie View A&M track athletes died in a rollover crash in February 2000. Both colleges curtailed use of the vans following the crashes.

Garrott, chief of NHTSA's vehicle stability and control division, said that using the agency's new "static stability factor" test -- a mathematical calculation of a vehicle's center of gravity -- the large vans would receive two out of five stars with a few passengers. Fully loaded, the rating would drop to one star. Most minivans receive four stars under the NHTSA rating.

NHTSA hasn't tested full-size vans as part of an unfolding plan to rate the tendency of cars and light trucks to roll over.

But in the wake of the agency's new controversial rollover ratings, the NHTSA study could spark another battle with Detroit automakers who market such vans as the Dodge Ram wagon, Ford Econoline, GMC Savanna, and Chevrolet Express. The vans are popular with airport shuttle

### Rollover danger

A new federal study suggests that large, full-size passenger vans pose a greater risk of rolling over than smaller vans when fully loaded. Here are the sales of full-size vans last year:

Vehicle	2000 sales
Ford Econoline	158,027
GMC Savana	38,587
Dodge Ram wagon	20,641
Chevrolet Express	14,502

Source: Autodata Inc.

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services, church groups and high school and college athletic programs.

Another concern is how frequently passengers in such large vans use their seat belts. The National Transportation Safety Board has investigated several accidents involving large vans where the passengers suffered deaths or injuries because they were not buckled up.

NHTSA spokesman Tim Hurd said the findings were still in a preliminary stage and would not be published by the agency until further review.

Automakers had little to say about the NHTSA presentation Monday, saying they haven't had a chance to review the findings. But they stood behind their large passenger vans as safe, reliable and economical transportation for groups.

"They're inherently good, safe stable vans," said General Motors spokesman Greg Martin. "Of course, they cannot be driven like passenger cars. They serve a completely different purpose."

Rollovers -- more common on vehicles with a high center of gravity, or top-heavy -- have become a new concern for federal safety regulators as pickup trucks, sport-utility vehicles and vans become more popular on the nation's roads, and in the wake of the recall of 6.5 million Firestone tires.

"We're interested in doing whatever we can to mitigate these problems," said Ford spokeswoman Maria Sheler-Edwards.

*You can reach Jeff Plungis at (202) 662-7378 or at [jplungis@detnews.com](mailto:jplungis@detnews.com).*

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