



Loaded vans spell trouble

Passenger vehicles prone to roll over, federal advisory says

By David Miller / Detroit News Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Federal safety experts warned Monday that large passenger vans -- popular with church groups, high school sports programs and college athletic teams -- pose a greater risk of rolling over when fully loaded.

In a consumer advisory, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration also said the vans should be operated by experienced drivers. The advisory covers vans such as the Ford Econoline E350, the Ford Club Wagon, Chevrolet Express 3500, Dodge Ram wagon, and the GMC Savana G3500.

"They become an entirely different vehicle when loaded," said Rae Tyson, a NHTSA spokesman. "If you compare a lightly loaded van as compared to one with more than 10 passengers, the risk increases threefold."

The agency last issued a warning in August in response to deaths caused by faulty Firestone tires.

The latest advisory comes after a study released last month showed large vans, when carrying 15 passengers, were 35 percent more likely than smaller vans to be involved in a rollover accident.

The study was prompted by a series of high-profile accidents involving college sports teams, which use the vans frequently.

Tyson said NHTSA is aware of 71 accidents involving the vans from 1993 through 1999, resulting in 126 deaths.

The lack of seat belt use among passengers was a factor in many of those accidents, said Mike Morrissey, a [General Motors Corp.](#) spokesman.

"You can get a false sense of security in a large vehicle," he said. "If you go into turns at a proper speed and obey the rules, there's no special safety concerns."

Tyson said the vans are not inherently unsafe. However, people need to realize they can't be driven like a conventional vehicle.

"The only tip we're saying is you should use drivers that are experienced and have had some training in driving larger vehicles of this type," he said.

Training is mandatory for anyone driving the vans at the University of Detroit-Mercy, which uses the vehicles for transporting most of its sports teams.

"(The class is) a couple hours long," said Glenn Knott, the university's director of athletic facilities and special events. "They go through talking about blind spots and defensive driving ideas as well as actually getting them some practice time with the van."

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