

Government warns of rollover risk in 15-passenger vans

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By Nedra Pickler / Associated Press

WASHINGTON -- A type of van commonly used to get church groups to socials and college teams to the game got a government safety warning Monday, after research showed it was three times as likely to roll over when fully loaded.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration also advised that 15-passenger vans, often driven by college students or volunteers in church and civic organizations, should only be operated by experienced drivers.

The consumer advisory -- rare for the NHTSA -- was prompted by a federal study that found the vans are three times more likely to roll over when loaded with 10 or more passengers, and comes after several fatal accidents involving college sports teams.

Four members of the Prairie View A&M University track team were killed and seven others were seriously injured when their van rolled over on the way to a meet last year. Other serious rollover accidents last year involved the Wisconsin-Oshkosh swim team, DePaul's women's track team and Kenyon College swim team.

NHTSA found that when fully loaded, the vans' center of gravity shifts up and to the back, increasing the risk of rollovers, especially in panic maneuvers by drivers.

"You have a vehicle that behaves entirely differently than when they are lightly loaded," NHTSA spokesman Rae Tyson said. "There is nothing inherently wrong with these vehicles as long as you understand those characteristics and take that in to account."

The NHTSA identified a number of 15-passenger models, although its list may not include all models: Ford Econoline E350, Ford Club Wagon E350, Chevrolet Express 3500, GMC Savana G3500, GMC Rally/Vandura G3500, Dodge Ram Van/Wagon B3500 and Dodge Ram Wagon B350.

Anyone carrying 16 or more people for commercial purposes is required to have a commercial drivers license, but no special license or experience is required for the 15-passenger vans.

Federal law bans the purchase of 15-passenger vans for schools, but there is no such ban for colleges.

NHTSA had no estimate on the number of 15-person vans currently in operation, but the vehicles are available at many rental agencies.

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On the Net:

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov>

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