

Towing a Trailer

Trailers that become detached from the towing vehicle can lead to very serious and deadly accidents. Trailer-related accidents, however, may be minimized by taking the following actions:

Towing Vehicle

Verify the following with the vehicle manufacturer:

- Brake and suspension system designed to tow trailers.
- Modifications necessary to allow vehicles to tow trailers will not compromise vehicle handling/performance.
- Trailers to be towed will not exceed manufacturer's recommended/maximum weight limits.

Trailer Brakes

- Check with local authorities regarding trailer braking requirements and laws.
- Electric braking systems: verify proper installation, wiring, maintenance, and that system has a dashboard-mounted manual override button, which will allow the towing vehicle driver to activate the trailer brakes without operating the towing vehicle brakes.
- Hydraulic surge braking systems: regularly inspect, test, and maintain the system and all components.

Emergency Breakaway Requirements

All trailers that require brakes must have a means of activating the trailer's brakes if the trailer becomes detached from the towing vehicle. Specifically:

- Electric braking systems: trailer must have an emergency battery backup system, as well as a breakaway switch, which will provide electrical power and activate the braking system in the event of a breakaway.
- Hydraulic surge braking systems: trailer must have a cable or chain connecting the towing vehicle and trailer. In the event of a breakaway, the cable or chain will mechanically activate the trailer's braking system.

Trailer Wiring

Proper wiring and functioning of flashers, tail and brake lights are critical for safe operation. Perform pre-trip inspections to assure lights are working properly. Heavy-duty flashers may be needed in the vehicle to allow for the extra electrical load trailer lights require. Be aware connector corrodes easily and requires constant attention to maintain proper working order. Wiring to connector should be carefully routed so that it cannot come apart in tight turns, chafe through, or short out.

Tires

Tires should be checked frequently to avoid running with a flat, which can catch on fire. Use a tire gauge regularly to make sure tires are inflated to the recommended pressure.

Trailer Ball and Safety Chains

Never haul a trailer with a coupler of a different size than the hitch. Balls that are used must follow the rating capacity of the hitch. It should be located so the trailer sits level when connected to the tow vehicle and should be lightly greased so the hitch rotates smoothly on it. Safety chains should be long enough for tight turns and be crossed (right to left and left to right) to create a "saddle" which will help maintain control while stopping if tongue fails. Do not allow chains to drag on the pavement, as this can grind them to an unsafe condition in a very short time. Inspect hitch and tongue for cracks when hooking up and check lights and brakes each time the trailer is hooked up.

Windy Conditions

Wind can cause havoc when towing a trailer, resulting in oscillations or sudden pulling to one side. Even a 30 mph crosswind can blow a trailer right off the road if a sudden gust occurs. Reduce the risk of traveling in these conditions by slowing down and utilize trailer sway control braces to help reduce the effects of wind gusts and passing trucks.

Safety Towing Checklist

Preplanning and inspecting the trailer and towing vehicle before a trip are important before towing.

- Inspect safety chains
- Inspect brake wiring and harness, and clean if needed
- Inspect and/or clean lighting plug and receptacle
- Inspect all hitch components for cracking or broken welds
- Test breakaway switch and lubricate every three months
- Check tire pressures and inspect each for wear
- Check exterior lighting, brake lights and blinkers
- Lubricate coupler and latch