

# 101 Critical Days of Summer

## Safety Tip #11 - Towing Safely

Whether you're conscious of it or not, you've probably seen lots of tow vehicles pulling cars down the road. Most of us don't really pause to think about the scene too often -- we may grip the wheel with both hands and drive with a bit more caution, but once we've passed, our focus is back on the road in front of us.

But there's a reason we clutch the wheel a little tighter, and it's a fairly obvious one: When one hulking mass of metal connected to another one rolls down the road together, the thought of the former separating from the latter is enough to keep us alert.

It's a simple matter of safety. Did the person towing make all the right connections? Is he or she driving safely? Are you able to tell if the two vehicles in front of you are [braking](#)? Of course, if you're the one towing a car, these are the questions you'll need to ask yourself. Car towing safety procedures can keep your mind at ease and everyone on the road safe.

- How the size and weight of a trailer affect the selection of a tow vehicle
- Things to consider if you already have a tow vehicle
- The importance of trailer manufacturers' tow ratings
- How to measure the weight of a trailer
- The hitching, braking, and wiring systems that connect tow vehicles with trailers
- Tire safety
- Proper loading and weight distribution of cargo and equipment
- State and local requirements for towing a trailer
- A pre-departure checklist
- Safety tips for driving with a trailer
- Safety tips for maintaining a tow vehicle and trailer



### Getting Started

If you've never trailered a camper or boat, there are several things you need to consider. First is the towing capacity of your car, truck or SUV. You can find this information in your vehicle's owner's manual. Generally, small family sedans are not suitable for towing, although a small, aluminum fishing boat may not present a problem, provided you have appropriate towing equipment installed on the car. Most standard pick-up trucks and SUVs can trailer smaller campers and boats up to 25 feet, but again, consult your vehicle owner's manual for limitations.

### Weighing In

Your camper and boat's owner's manual will list the "dry weight". That's the weight of the camper or boat, less fuel, water and gear. Make sure when you're assessing your vehicle's towing capacity; you add several hundred pounds to the dry weight of the camper and boat to account for those extras.

### Muscle Power

As the weight, length and width (beam) of a given camper and boat increase, so does the muscle power needed to haul a camper as well as launch and retrieve boats. A small camper or boat may be easy for one person to handle, but larger campers and boats, generally those more than 25 feet, may require additional hands. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it. Fellow campers and trailer boaters are always happy to help.

### Proper Setup

A walk-around inspection of your vehicle and attached trailer should be done before every trip. Items to check include the vehicle hitch, trailer attachment points and safety chains, operation of lights and brake controls, inflation pressure of all tires, trailer load distribution, tarp covers, and tie-downs.



Check your vehicle and trailer owner's manuals for recommended towing capacities, and ensure that both vehicles comply with requirements for equipment such as trailer brake controls and side- and rear-view mirrors. Also be aware of local restrictions on trailer height, width, and weight, as well as any special permits that may be needed for certain types of trailers and their cargo. Exceeding or ignoring these regs not only results in unsafe operation, it could void your insurance and vehicle warranties, and violate state or federal laws.

Trailer weight and load distribution are often overlooked by users, but they are primary factors when accidents occur. Most manufacturers provide specs for recommended gross trailer weights (GTW) that should not be exceeded. Owners can weigh loaded trailers at highway truck stops or trucking facilities and can test tongue weights (no more than 10 to 15 percent of GTW) of lighter trailers using a household bathroom scale. Use straps or tie-downs to prevent items from shifting during travel.

### Handle With Care

Driving with a camper, boat or trailer, loaded or unloaded, is far different from ordinary driving. You need to anticipate how the trailer will respond to your every move, especially when slowing down, turning, and stopping. Knowing how to operate trailer brake controls or react when a trailer veers out of control requires training and practice.

When towing, drive at moderate speeds and maintain additional space between you and the vehicle ahead—your vehicle's brakes may be capable of stopping you and your load but will require extra stopping distance. Remember to allow considerable extra room when passing or maneuvering around other vehicles. A wider turn radius is also necessary to avoid curbs and roadside obstacles, and to prevent pinching or jackknifing the trailer tongue. To improve driver visibility, mount side mirrors on extensions and remove your pickup's tailgate, especially when towing small or low-profile trailers that are difficult to see from a vehicle's cab.

Backing a trailer requires practice and finesse. Assign a helper to guide you and flag oncoming vehicles. Turn in small increments—even minor input at the steering wheel results in large movements at the trailer's far end. Make turns by placing one hand at the bottom of the wheel and moving your hand in the direction you want the trailer to turn.

Practice backing in an empty parking lot if you are a beginner or if it's been awhile since you have done any towing.

Additional driving tips: [http://buzztrader.com/articles/towing/safety\\_tips.html](http://buzztrader.com/articles/towing/safety_tips.html)

[http://www.goldengait.com/towing\\_safety/](http://www.goldengait.com/towing_safety/)

### Safety Checklists

<http://www.rversonline.org/ArtTowingTips.html>

<http://buzztrader.com/articles/towing/predepartures.html>

### Towing Resources

- ◆ Your concern may be hauling a boat, so don't forget to look through these sites for additional towing information:  
[http://www.millerwelds.com/pdf/safety/trailer\\_8\\_03.pdf](http://www.millerwelds.com/pdf/safety/trailer_8_03.pdf)  
<http://www.discoverboating.com/buying/certified/trailers.aspx>  
<http://www.discoverboating.com/beginner/safety/quiz.aspx>
- ◆ Here are a couple of sites concerning trailer maintenance:  
<http://buzztrader.com/articles/towing/maintenances.html>
- ◆ Towing 101: <http://www.hitchinfo.com/index.cfm?event=viewpage&contentpieceid=5143>
- ◆ Trailer Towing Safety Videos: <http://www.trailertowingsafety.com/>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DQ4ILPygoQ>
- ◆ The federal government offers a comprehensive trailer towing guide as a free download:  
<http://www.nhtsa.gov/cars/problems/equipment/towing/index.htm>
- ◆ Here's another site with good information: <http://www.dmv.ca.gov/pubs/dl648/dl648pt12.htm>



**Happy Towing!! –  
The Risk  
Management Staff**

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from multiple sources.  
Sources are available upon  
request in the 157 ARW/SE  
Office.**