

Before you start

Drivers should conduct a pre-trip inspection prior to each trip. A checklist should be used to document inspection and note any needed repairs. Standard items should include: actual tire pressure (requires tire pressure gauge), tread wear, all lights and signals, reflectors, windshield wipers, windshield washer, mirrors, brakes, fluid levels, belts, hoses, horn, emergency equipment, cargo security and others as identified.

Watch your speed

As with driving a car, always scan the road ahead for hazards and obstacles and adjust your driving to suit. Because a van is a much larger and heavier vehicle, it's important to alter your driving style to match, as there's more weight to bring to a stop when braking.

A study from Volkswagen reports that a heavy, packed van needs an additional two meters to stop, compared to an empty van – even when driving 30mph. This distance grows to five meters, if you double the speed to 60mph.

It's essential to keep an eye on your speed and consider the extra braking distance needed if you have a full load in the back of the van. Be sure to leave a safe distance between your van and the vehicle in front. Remember it's not a race, so make sure to bring your speed down and leave more space for braking than you would in a conventional car.

Have a **cushion of safety**. A "cushion of safety" is the area around your van that you should try to keep free of other vehicles and pedestrians. Maintaining a safe following distance for vehicle control is perhaps the most critical part of the "cushion of safety." • Scan 12-15 seconds ahead, which is about 1 to 1½ blocks in the city and ¼ mile on the highway. Know what is going on ahead of your vehicle. • Maintain at least a 4-second following distance in ideal conditions. Increase the following distance in adverse weather or road conditions, driving at night, or if you have a tailgater.

Blind Spots

Before starting your journey, check your visibility and make yourself aware of any blind spots. Ensure that you adjust your wing mirrors correctly, so you can see blind spots around the van. You can check this by asking a friend to walk around the vehicle, so you can see when they go out of sight and alter the position of your mirrors accordingly.

These vans have rear-quarter blind spots and limited visibility, thanks to the omission of the center rear-view mirror. Instead, you must rely upon a pair of extra-large wing mirrors.

Just remember, the larger a van is, the more likely it is that cars and other small vehicles following closely behind may be partially or entirely obscured.

Driving Environment

As opposed to a car, the van driver's position over the front wheels changes his/her perspective of the driving environment. Also, the overhang of the van (distance between the rear tire and bumper) is important to consider when backing.

- Scan the area for obstacles behind, below and above the van.
- When backing, make sure there is enough overhang clearance.
- It may be necessary to use a spotter outside the van.
- Back slowly and check the mirrors.

Adverse Conditions

- Reduce your vehicle speed and increase your following distance in adverse weather.
- Hydroplaning can occur at speeds as low as 30 mph. When the road is wet, increase the stopping distance.

It's important to consider weather conditions before you start your journey. For the most part, vans perform as well as cars in poor weather, but they require a lower speed and need larger margins when braking.

High winds can be hazardous when driving a van, especially if your van is empty. That's because they have a higher center of gravity and will be affected by any windier conditions more than a car, that is lower to the ground.

The best tip for driving in windy conditions is to slow down slightly, keep your eyes on the road and keep a safe distance from other vehicles – especially high-sided buses or trucks. As always, avoid driving in adverse weather conditions wherever possible, especially in a vehicle you're not used to.

Driving time

Fatigue is a common factor in crash statistics. Consider driving time as related to wakeful time within a 24-hour period. A standard workday being eight hours, this might be a good limit for the average driver. Taking a ten-minute break every 100 miles or two hours is also recommended.

Driving a fully loaded van

It's important to be aware of the differences between driving an empty and fully loaded van. For starters, the large storage bay and carrying capacity means a van can accommodate very heavy loads. This makes a significant difference to all aspects of performance, from acceleration to braking and handling.

A top van driving tip when carrying a heavy load is to err on the side of caution and leave even greater distances to other road vehicles as you'll need longer to come to a standstill. A loaded van has a stiffer suspension, so it's wise to avoid potholes as you van will hit them harder.

Each van also has a weight limit:

144" wheelbase is 3836 pounds

170" wheelbase is 4244 pounds

Do not exceed this limit.

Load the van securely and evenly

An overloaded or poorly loaded van can be dangerous. Take note of the van's maximum load capacity and make sure that all items and materials are loaded securely to avoid any personal injury.

It's also important to spread the contents evenly and as low as possible in the bay to ensure safety and to minimize damage. Loose materials can be a serious hazard and you should tie things down where you can, using appropriate securing apparatus.

Keeping the center of gravity low will help reduce the risk of roll-over. Tiedown straps, cargos cages or other restraints should be used to prevent cargo from shifting during transit or from causing additional injury in the event of a collision.

Some of the information was taken from the Texas Department of Public Safety and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).