

QuickSmarts

Safe towing



Towing a trailer – such as a caravan or camper trailer, boat trailer, horse float, or special-purpose trailer – requires additional driving skills, concentration, and safety precautions.

The driver of the vehicle is legally responsible for being safe when towing a trailer, and ensuring the towing vehicle, trailer and couplings meet the minimum standards.

Driving while towing a trailer will also be more enjoyable if the combination is well designed and set up.

Your driving

Towing a trailer requires additional skills. You should gain confidence before trying to tow at a high speed, over a long distance or in confined spaces. Consider a few small practice trips before heading off on a long trip.

When towing a trailer (including caravans), remember to:

- allow for the extra length and width of the trailer when entering traffic
- allow for its tendency to ‘cut in’ on corners and curves
- accelerate, brake and steer smoothly and gently to avoid swaying, especially in wet or slippery conditions
- allow for the effects of cross-winds, passing traffic and uneven road surfaces
- leave a longer stopping distance between you and the vehicle ahead; increase the gap for longer, heavier trailers and allow even more distance in poor driving conditions
- use a lower gear in both manual and automatic vehicles when travelling downhill to make your car easier to control and reduce the strain on your brakes
- allow more time and distance to overtake and avoid ‘cutting off’ the vehicle you are overtaking when returning to the left lane
- get someone to watch the rear of the trailer when you reverse—reversing is difficult and takes practice

Vehicles towing caravans and driving too closely together make it hard for other motorists to overtake safely. Consider other motorists and allow plenty of distance between you and other vehicles, and be careful to:

- not hold up traffic—pull off the road where it is safe to do so, and where it won’t create a build-up of traffic unable to overtake
- be aware that your vehicle and trailer will have a tendency to sway when a heavy vehicle overtakes you.

As a driver, you have a legal responsibility to your passengers, other road users and yourself to ensure that the load you’re carrying is securely restrained. If your load overhangs at the front, back or sides, check that the dimensions are legal¹. It is unsafe and illegal to overload a trailer or caravan.

You must ensure:

- the aggregate trailer mass (ATM) specified by the trailer manufacturer is not exceeded
- the mass of the towing vehicle does not exceed the Gross Vehicle Mass
- the mass of the combination does not exceed the Gross Combination Mass
- tyre or tow coupling capacities are not exceeded
- lights, number plate and registration labels are not obscured in any way.

Your vehicle

Safe towing starts with ensuring the tow vehicle is suitable to tow the trailer. You can select the right trailer or caravan to match your tow vehicle, or buy a tow vehicle to suit your trailer type and towing needs.

While modern vehicles are lighter and provide better service for normal motoring, some don't have the necessary characteristics for towing.

The owner manual usually indicates the towing capacity and other trailer features that are appropriate for the vehicle. You should not exceed these limits.

Towing will affect your vehicle in several ways, including:

- decreased acceleration and braking performance
- reduced vehicle control and manoeuvrability
- increased fuel consumption.

Therefore, when assessing the load, consider the weight of the tow vehicle and trailer, including:

- the number of passengers you intend to carry
- the equipment in the tow vehicle, such as tools and camping gear
- modifications to the tow vehicle, such as bull bars, long-range fuel tanks, supplementary batteries and roof racks
- the load on the trailer or caravan:
 - on a caravan: may include water tanks, gas bottles, food and drink, clothing, toys
 - on a boat trailer: may include fishing gear, safety equipment, motor and fuel
 - on a horse float: may include the weight of the horses, tackle and food.

Ensure your trailer is loaded safely and legally: load heavy items over the axle/s and avoid overloading the front of the trailer.

Maintain all your towing equipment regularly, including vehicle and trailer, to ensure safe towing.

Ask your trailer or vehicle dealer, RACQ or other competent service agent to check that the:

- towing vehicle and trailer are in a roadworthy and safe condition
- trailer's wheel bearings, suspension and brakes are in good working condition.

This is particularly important for a trailer that hasn't been used for some time.

Footnotes

1. www.tmr.qld.gov.au/Safety/Vehicle-standards-and-modifications/Loads-and-towing
2. www.qld.gov.au/transport/vehicle-safety/towing
3. www.racq.com.au/cars-and-driving/driving/towing
4. www.caravanqld.com.au/
5. maic.qld.gov.au/trailers/

For more information, visit www.qld.gov.au/transport/vehicle-safety/towing

This fact sheet includes information to help you to drive safely while towing a trailer. There are requirements under Queensland law that apply to any driver towing a trailer. Visit the Queensland Government website² for more information or contact RACQ³ or Caravanning Queensland⁴ for advice on selecting a suitable trailer or caravan combination. The Motor Accident Insurance Commission⁵ can also provide advice about Compulsory Third Party (CTP) insurance for your trailer.

Note: this information relates to safe towing in Queensland, and applicable Queensland regulations. If travelling outside Queensland, be sure to check the regulations of the relevant state or territory.

Your trip

Whether you're planning a short, familiar route or heading out on a long journey into new territories, it's imperative to plan ahead for every trip you make, including planning for the unexpected.

On long distance journeys, take into account the availability of fuel and food supplies. If you are travelling vast distances in remote areas, plan to have enough fuel, food and water to last you between towns and service stations.

Factor in additional time to load and unload your trailer, and the likelihood of travelling safely at a lower speed taking longer than if you were travelling without your trailer.

Plan your rest breaks and share the driving with another experienced driver wherever possible.

When driving in regional and rural areas:

- Watch out for wildlife and livestock on roads, roadsides and near water crossings – particularly at sunrise and after sunset.
- Watch out for tractors towing farm machinery, especially during harvest times.
- Don't stop on or near bridges, floodways or on narrow sections of roadway.
- Don't pull out onto the road when you see another vehicle approaching, wait until it has passed.
- Take note of any yellow warning signs and speed limit advisory signs, and adjust your speed appropriately, well before reaching the turn or hazard.
- Always slow down when approaching railway level crossings to check for trains as many rural level crossings do not have boom gates.

When driving on unsealed roads, you should be wary of:

- Varying surfaces such as gravel, sand or dirt because your vehicle's tyres can lose traction. On these surfaces, decrease your speed and increase your following distance behind the vehicle in front.
- Dust clouds from vehicles travelling ahead of you or passing you, which can affect your ability to see clearly.
- Wet conditions, which can cause the road to become muddy, slippery and boggy.

Don't tangle with a road train - these heavyweights can be up to 55 metres long (the length of ten cars): When overtaking a road train, expect it to stay on the bitumen and be prepared for it to sway from side to side. Motorists can share the road safely with road trains by following these simple rules:

- If there is an oncoming road train, slow down, pull over onto the shoulder of the road and stop, if necessary, to allow it to pass safely.
- When overtaking a road train flash your lights to warn the driver that you plan to overtake, allow at least one kilometre of clear road ahead, and beware of soft road shoulders, guide posts and wildlife.

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