



Winter Driving: Towing in winter

To determine safe distance spacing between vehicles, consider how long it would take your vehicle and trailer to coast to stop – without brakes. In slippery conditions this is often the safest course of action. Allowing enough distance to coast to a stop every time you come to halt will provide a safe distance and a traveling speed.

Practice using a light touch on the brakes. Even with anti-lock braking systems you should apply light, steady pressure to avoid causing a skid. Pumping the brake pedal should be a smooth action, going from light to firm in a gradual move. Keep both hands on the wheel. Downshifting a manual transmission may assist with braking, but sudden gear changes can upset a vehicle's balance. In turns (and particularly highway off-ramps) maintain a constant speed, avoid braking or accelerating – the angle of trailer and tow vehicle in a turn is most prone to jackknifing as centrifugal force is directing the vehicle combination sideways. Otherwise use your transmission (manual and automatic): selecting a lower gear on down grades will increase resistance, but be aware the added strain translates into extra heat. That's why a transmission cooler is a smart investment. Note, too, that you should never allow a trailer combination to coast in neutral, if you're not in gear, you're not in control.

Driving defensively is never more important than when you are towing a trailer because the added weight, length and stress of the trailer impede your ability to react in sudden avoidance situations. While towing a trailer, the goal is to never be in a position that requires panic maneuvers. Anticipate cars entering your lane from side streets or on-ramps and adjust your speed accordingly to maintain your safe distance. If someone is following too closely, maintain a constant speed. If they decide to pass, your steady speed is the safest, most predictable situation you can offer them. Always drive with your lights on.

Though most two-place trailers don't require brakes for safety's sake, any trailer with a gross weight of over 3,000 lb should be equipped with brakes. Consider that a trailer's mass pushes the tow vehicle during braking, increasing the risk of a jackknife, or brake fade while on steep grades. Trailer brakes and the engine's natural exhaust resistance slows a combination at a safe steady rate. Bolt-on aftermarket engine braking devices can also pump up this resistance even further.

The most often overlooked aspect of towing is the importance of the tow vehicle's tires. Tires offer towing stability, weight bearing and safe stopping. And, contrary to popular belief, large beefy tires may be the worst choice for your tow vehicle. How's that?

Many of these tires are only rated load range B (maximum pressure 35 psi) and are a P (passenger) rated tire, despite being OEM fitted. Some tires are also very tall, giving you a taller axle ratio, thereby reducing power. Heavy lugs also increase rolling resistance, reducing performance and fuel economy, while poor handling can result from tires that are wider than the rims they are mounted on. Fat, luggy tires often have weak sidewalls and bulge from the rim. Under stress, the sidewalls roll and cause the tow vehicle to feel unstable as well as passing that unstable energy to the trailer. This can cause fishtailing. A preferable tire is one that is only as wide as the rim, has a shorter, stiffer sidewall and is rated LT (light truck).

Equipment preparation is important but safe towing is about driving with the right mind-set. A trick to adjusting your driving to accommodate the towed weight is to place yourself (mentally) in the seat of the big rigs many of us love to hate.

These tips are for trucks with GVWRs of 150,000 lb and up:

- Double all your distances – following, stopping, starting and lane changing
- Always use your signals – let your signals flash ten times before making a lane change
- On multi-lane highways move to the centre lane one mile (1.6 km) before on/off ramps – this avoids any last minute maneuvers because of merging traffic
- Stay out of the passing lane
- Check your straps, doors, lights, latches, tires, chains and hitches each time you stop or every 100 kilometers
- Never backup if you can go forward
- If you do have to back up use a spotter
- Never, ever be in a hurry