If you are going to tow a caravan, trailer or other vehicle safely, you must know the relevant road rules.

The towing vehicle and the caravan or trailer must be licensed, roadworthy and meet the requirements of the Vehicle Standards Regulations and the Australian Design Rules.

SAFE TOWING WEIGHTS

Most vehicle manufacturers specify safe towing limits in the vehicle operator's manual. These weights are precise and you must not exceed them. To do so is not only illegal and dangerous, but can cause costly mechanical damage to your vehicle.

If manufacturers' specifications are not available and the towing capacity is not specified, then the following limits apply for towing vehicles of a gross vehicle mass of less than 4.5 tonnes:

- The loaded mass of the trailer or caravan must not exceed the empty mass of the towing vehicle, except where the trailer or caravan is fitted with brakes; in which case the loaded mass of the trailer/caravan must not exceed 1.5 times the empty mass of the towing vehicle.

- If the trailer or caravan is not fitted with brakes, then the loaded mass of the trailer/caravan must not exceed 750kg, except for trailers manufactured before 1 July 1988 (which were approved to carry a loaded mass of up to one tonne).

- The loaded mass of the trailer or caravan must not exceed the towing capacity of any component of the vehicle/trailer combination, including the tow bar.

- The loaded mass of the trailer or caravan must not exceed the aggregate trailer/caravan mass.

- The capacity of the towbar and coupling must be at least equal to the loaded mass of the trailer or caravan. A towbar fitted to a vehicle manufactured after January 1992 must be marked with its load capacity and either the vehicle model for which it is designed, or the towbar manufacturer's part number.

- The tow bar should be expertly fitted with the height of coupling set so that the drawbar is level. The tow ball coupling must not obscure the towing vehicle's numberplate.

COUPLINGS

Couplings are a secure means of attaching a trailer or caravan to the towing vehicle to prevent, as far as possible, any lateral swing of the trailer/caravan while the combination is moving.

- Couplings must be properly designed, marked with the manufacturer's name or trademark and be capable of bearing the trailer or caravan's rated aggregate mass.

- Typical approved couplings include a 50mm standard ball coupling for trailers or caravans with a rated aggregate mass up to 2,300kg and a heavy-duty ball up to 3,500 kg.

- Trailers or caravans up to and including 2,500kg must be fitted with at least one safety chain for connection to the towing vehicle. Trailers or caravans over 2,500kg must be fitted with two crossed safety chains.

TOWING ANOTHER VEHICLE

It is illegal to drive a vehicle towing a caravan or trailer if someone is in or on them.

On a road, you can only tow another vehicle with someone in it, for example a car that has broken down, if:

- The space between the two vehicles is not more than four metres, or 2.5 metres if either vehicle is a motor cycle;

- Any rope, chain or wire you use is longer than two metres, and has a flag or other similar object attached to it to make it clearly visible to traffic approaching from the side;

- A competent and qualified person is in charge of controlling the towed vehicle and is able to control it; and

- It is safe to do so.

SPEED

Although the maximum speed limit in Western Australia is 110 km/h, the maximum for a vehicle towing a trailer, caravan or other vehicle is 100 km/h.

Remember, this is the maximum speed and you must always drive at a safe following distance and in a safe way consistent with:

- the posted limit;
- the size and mass of your vehicle;
- the road surface;
- weather conditions; and
- your experience and driving ability.

Remember, in built-up areas the speed limit is 50 km/h unless otherwise indicated by a speed limit sign.

BRAKING

Braking distances are significantly increased when you are towing a caravan or trailer.

Before towing make sure that the brakes on the towing vehicle and those on the towed vehicle are in good condition and provide braking to all wheels that are in contact with the road.

Trailers or caravans with only a single axle and a gross trailer mass not exceeding 750kg do not have to have a braking system.

Trailers or caravans with a gross trailer mass over 750kg but not over 2,000kg must have a braking system to the wheels of at least one axle.

Trailers or caravans with a gross trailer mass over 2,000 kg must have a braking system to all wheels.

Over-ride brakes may be used on trailers or caravans with a gross trailer mass up to and including 2,000 kg. All brakes must be capable of being operated from the foot brake of the towing vehicle.

The added mass when towing increases demands on the braking system of the towing vehicle, generating heat in the braking material and causing braking efficiency to be notably reduced. When travelling downhill, engage a lower gear. This allows the vehicle's engine to assist in slowing your speed, thereby conserving brake efficiency.

Maintaining a safe following distance will reduce the need to over brake.

IMPROVING YOUR SKILLS

Towing will make a difference to the way your vehicle performs and handles. Braking, cornering and overtaking all require enhanced driving skills, such as those that can be obtained at an approved driving course.

FOR FURTHER ENQUIRIES CONTACT:

Department of Transport
Vehicle Safety
21 Murray Road South
Welshpool WA 6160
Telephone: (08) 13 11 56
Or visit their web site at www.transport.wa.gov.au/licensing

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