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Consumer Advisory: NHTSA Reissues 15-Passenger Van Safety Caution

As the fall and winter driving seasons get under way, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is urging users of 15-passenger vans to take specific steps to keep occupants safe. Two recent fatal crashes, in New York and Georgia, involving 15-passenger vans that rolled over and resulted in 10 deaths give urgency to this reminder.

The agency warns that tire maintenance is paramount to preventing tragedies, such as these recent rollover crashes, from occurring. Users of 15-passenger vans need to make sure the vehicles have appropriately-sized tires that are properly inflated before every trip. The agency also points out that tires degrade over time. For this reason, NHTSA recommends that spare tires not be used as replacements for worn tires. In fact, many tire manufacturers recommend that tires older than 10 years not be used at all.

NHTSA said that it is directing this advisory to church groups, other non-profit organizations and colleges that may be keeping older 15-passenger vans in service longer than usual because of tight transportation budgets. Pre-primary, primary and secondary schools should not use 15-passenger vans for transporting school children, as they do not provide the same level of safety as school buses. It is also against federal law for schools to buy new 15-passenger vans for school transportation purposes.

Here are some safety tips for anyone planning a trip in 15-passenger vans:

- If you are an owner, make sure the vehicle is properly maintained.
- Owners should make sure drivers are fully trained and experienced in operating a 15-passenger van and are properly licensed.
- 15-passenger vans are very sensitive to loading and should not be overloaded under any circumstances. Agency research shows overloading not only increases rollover risk but makes the vehicle more unstable in any handling maneuvers.
- Owners should make sure that properly sized tires are being used on their vehicles.
- Before every trip, drivers should check the tires for proper inflation, and make sure there are no signs of wear. Correct tire size and inflation pressure information can be found in the owner's manual.
- If you are a passenger, make sure you buckle up for every trip.

Additional information on 15-passenger van safety can be found on www.safercar.gov

Additional Inspection Items Recommended for 15 Passenger Vans

- Tires: All tires, including the spare, should be checked to ensure that they are the appropriate size for the vehicle, are inflated to the proper pressure, have sufficient tread depth, and are in good condition.
 - Appropriate for the vehicle
 - Typical vans require LT load range E tires
 - Correct size information will be in the owner's manual and on the vehicle placard located on the driver side B-pillar or the glove compartment door
 - Inflation Pressure
 - Should be set to the vehicle manufacturer's recommended pressure
 - Correct inflation pressure will be in the owner's manual and on the vehicle placard located on the driver side B-pillar or the glove compartment door
 - Note: The front tires and the rear tires have different recommended inflation pressures
 - Tread Depth
 - Tread depth should be at least the legal tread depth
 - Tire Condition
 - Bulges, exposed tire cords, and cracks are indicators that a tire is beyond its useful life or dry rotten.
 - Valve stems should not have cracks or leak
 - Old Tires
 - The build date (week/yr) is molded into the inner sidewall of the tire
 - Some tire manufacturers recommend that tires over 10 years old be replaced
 - Replace the tire if the build date is not legible or visible
- Suspension System: Check for broken leaf springs, shocks, and shock absorbers
- Seat belts and air bag Condition:
 - All occupant protection systems that were originally provided must be available and fully functional. Belts should latch properly and the red air bag lamp should not illuminate after the vehicle is started