

Towing Considerations

If you've decided to buy a trailer, congratulations, you've made a big step—but now there's a lot more to think about. If you've decided on a motorhome, you can skip ahead to Chapter 5.

Let's talk about towing the two major types of trailers: conventional travel trailers, which are pulled from a ball hitch under your bumper, and fifth wheels, which are pulled from a hitch in the bed of your truck.

Fifth wheels are inherently smoother to tow due to their solid connection above the axle. This also allows them to weigh significantly more than a conventional trailer, and they can be built taller, wider, and longer.

For that reason, the biggest RVs are fifth wheels. But there are trade-offs. You lose quite a bit of truck bed space to the fifth wheel hitch and need a truck that can handle the extra weight in the bed. You'll also have to pay a bit extra to outfit a truck with a fifth wheel hitch.

Conventional travel trailers are usually lighter, shorter, and less expensive. They don't put much weight on the hitch, so they can often be towed with lighter vehicles.

Payload

All cars and trucks have some important numbers that you need to pay attention to, and payload is one of them. Payload is the downward force placed on the vehicle. That can come from your trailer, but the amount of cargo and passengers also add to the payload. Most manufacturers base payload off of a full tank of fuel and one 150-pound driver. Anything more than that needs to be considered when you decide whether your vehicle can tow a certain RV.



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Towing Capacity

Vehicles will also have a “tow capacity” number, which is what the vehicle can pull horizontally. You’ll want to make sure that the vehicle you pull your trailer with will fit into these numbers. People often suggest a 20 percent safety margin to make sure that you’re well within the limits.

Remember, these numbers are what the manufacturers say your vehicle can mechanically tow. That doesn’t mean you’ll be comfortable with the way it takes corners, climbs steep hills, or handles sway.

Sizing a Trailer to a Tow Vehicle

It can be difficult to figure out the payload and tow rating by looking at the stickers on your vehicle. Options and powertrain will also affect the towing numbers, so it’s not as simple as looking up your make and model.

Major truck manufacturers publish a chart for each year’s model showing the payload and tow capacity for the various configurations. Usually, a truck can tow more weight on a fifth wheel hitch than on a conventional hitch, so you’ll see different numbers for those. Some truck makers also have a vehicle identification number (VIN) lookup tool that will show you the exact options your vehicle has and what it’s rated to tow.

You’ll also need to know the weight of the trailer. Listed will be a “dry” or “curb” weight, which is how much the RV weighs when it rolls out of the factory with nothing inside it. More important is the Gross Vehicle Weight Rating (GVWR), which is how much your RV can weigh fully loaded. It’s generally equal to your dry weight plus your cargo carrying capacity.

When it comes to SUVs, all but the biggest ones are essentially just lifted cars, and you may be surprised to find they can’t tow much weight—usually less than 7,000 pounds. Those built on a truck chassis can only tow marginally more, usually around 8,500 pounds.

The vast majority of trailers over 5,000 pounds need to be towed by a capable pickup truck.

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Tow Rating	How much weight a tow vehicle can safely tow.
Payload Capacity	How much cargo weight can be safely added to a tow vehicle.
Cargo Carrying Capacity	The maximum weight limit for personal items you can add to an RV. This is the difference between your UVR (unloaded vehicle rating) and your GVWR (gross vehicle weight rating), telling you how much weight you can safely add to your trailer. Pay close attention to the cargo carrying capacity if you intend to travel with a lot of gear.
Dry Weight	How much a vehicle or rig weighs without anything (including fuel, water, and supplies) added to it.
Gross Vehicle Weight Rating	The maximum load weight (pounds) allowed for the vehicle or trailer as determined by the manufacturer. You should never exceed this weight rating when your RV is stocked with all of your gear, propane, fuel, fresh water, other supplies, cargo, and passengers.

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Truck Types

You'll often hear trucks classified as half-ton, three-quarter-ton, and one-ton. A half-ton truck—like a Ford F-150 or Chevy 1500—is going to be best at towing within the same range as those bigger SUVs. A three-quarter-ton truck—like an F-250 or Chevy 2500—will be best suited for heavier conventional trailers and lighter fifth wheels, and one-ton trucks will generally be best for larger fifth wheels.

One-ton trucks can have dual-rear wheels, making them wider and adding a significant amount of payload. A dually is required for the biggest fifth wheels and heavier slide-in truck campers. Regardless, these are general ranges, and you need to look at the actual numbers for the year, make, and model of your truck, as they can vary drastically.

Never take a salesperson's or social media expert's word on what you can tow. The only reliable source for information is the manufacturer's published information about your specific vehicle.

Diesel vs. Engines

Another towing consideration for trucks is whether to buy a gasoline or diesel engine. Diesel engines don't care so much about the weight behind them, so they're much more efficient at pulling the heaviest of trailers. But it comes at a price.

A diesel truck can cost \$10,000 more than a gasoline truck, and repair costs are higher as well. While gasoline is best for lighter trailers, diesel is helpful for medium-weight trailers—and it's required for the heaviest fifth wheels. You'll have a much higher tow rating.

Long Bed vs. Short Bed

Most heavy-duty trucks are sold with either a full 8-foot bed, or a shorter 6.5-foot bed. Sometimes half-ton trucks have even shorter beds. Bed length is important for fifth wheels, as the longer the bed, the further away the front cap of the fifth wheel is when turning. Towing a fifth wheel with a bed shorter than 8 feet can end up damaging the rear of the cab, unless you get a type of hitch called a "slider."

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Hitches, Brake Controllers, and Towing Aids

Regardless of the tow vehicle you own, you'll want to make sure it's outfitted with a hitch capable of handling your tow capacity, trailer wiring to make the lights work and provide power to the brakes, and a brake controller, which activates the trailer's brakes when you depress the brake pedal.

These are essential items, but there are others that make hooking up and towing a little easier. Side-view towing mirrors provide you with a wider view around the trailer, and backup cameras can help you see to align the hitch.

Many trucks now have built-in electronic sway control and other safety features like automatic emergency braking and blind-spot detection that extends down the length of the trailer.

Conventional Hitches

Conventional trailer hitches are called receiver hitches. They're mounted to the frame underneath the bumper of your vehicle, and receive a ball mount that the trailer attaches to. The receiver, the mount, and the ball are all rated to carry a certain load, and should be sized well over the weight of your trailer. A receiver hitch can be added if your vehicle didn't come with one. Ball mounts come in a variety of rises and drops, allowing you to get the ball at the exact right height to tow your trailer level.

Consider getting a weight-distribution hitch for your conventional trailer. These send some of the weight load toward the front of your truck, and most have built-in sway control.

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Fifth Wheel Hitches

Fifth wheel hitches attach through the truck bed onto the frame of the truck. Unless your truck comes with fifth wheel prep, the hitch will need to be installed with bolts into your truck. Fifth wheel prep usually includes trailer wiring inside the bed, which is helpful for connecting a fifth wheel's wiring without running it to the rear of the truck.

If you have a short bed truck, a slider hitch can help you avoid hitting the fifth wheel against the rear of the cab in a turning maneuver.

Towing safely is hands down the most important consideration for any trailer owner, and we highly recommend you check out the truck towing guides from the RV Safety & Education Foundation at [RVSEF.org](https://www.rvsef.org).

Related Reading

[5 Questions We Get Asked Towing our RV with an Electric Vehicle](#)

[What's the Best Truck for Towing a Travel Trailer or Fifth Wheel?](#)

[RV Sway Control Basics for Travel Trailers](#)

[A Guide to Hitching Your Travel Trailer](#)

[7 Half-Ton Towable Trailers You Can Pull With Your Pickup](#)