

COULD THIS HAPPEN TO YOU?



Hitch failure can have catastrophic results for you and others on the road.



Overloading is the prime suspect in many hitch, tire, axle and suspension failures. The Recreational Vehicle Safety & Educational Foundation estimates that 58% of RVs and tow vehicles exceed a manufacturer's stated weight rating. Of those, 60% are tow vehicles; 59% are motor homes; 55% are 5th wheels and 51% are travel trailers. Ten percent of overweight RVs exceed a tire rating without exceeding gross axle weight rating. RVSEF bases these figures on vehicles they actually weigh at seminars and rallies around the country.

Their advice? Load your rig like you would for a trip and have it weighed at a commercial scale. Know the true weight of your trailer or dinghy. Weigh each wheel of your trailer for accurate axle weight. Get the correct maximum weight ratings for your tow vehicle from the data plate on the driver door frame or other easy-to-spot location. Don't rely on sales brochures or window stickers. Trailers should have a data plate on the left front sidewall and inside an interior cabinet that lists maximum weight ratings.

For more tips on weighing your rig accurately, and to find out about upcoming RVSEF seminars, visit the website at rvsafety.com.

ENTER "BROKEN TRAILER HITCH" INTO THE online search engine of your choice and you will get an eyeful of the sometimes horrific results of a hitch system that fails while traveling down the highway.

A hitch or tow bar can fail for a number of reasons: improper installation or operation, inadequate weight capacity or simply lack of proper maintenance. Failure to clean and lubricate a hitch can greatly shorten its lifespan.

Weight Distribution Hitches

"A hitch will last forever if you keep the spring bars greased," says Dave Stewart, Eaz Lift Product Manager for Camco. "Unfortunately, a lot of folks don't do that."

Regular lubrication is key to a weight distributing hitch's longevity, he added. "Keeping your hitch lubricated with wheel bearing grease is the life of it," said Stewart, noting that lithium or other grease products can turn liquid and run off when hot. "Grease it daily, every time you pull with it," he emphasized.

Stewart said he would advise travel trailer owners to inspect the bottom of their round bar hitch to make sure the holes where the spring bars insert are still round and not egg-shaped. Inspect the plate that

holds the plunger and spring mechanism. If the holes are worn into ovals and the spring mechanism isn't working properly, the spring bars won't snap in correctly and can fall out and drag down the road, he said, quickly destroying them. If the ball mount shows this type of wear, it's time for a new hitch.

Tow Bars

Age and use are the most common reasons a tow bar has to be replaced, according to David Robinson, Director of Customer Service for Roadmaster. The most common failure of a tow bar results from backing up or from jackknifing in a panic stop without a supplemental braking system, he added.

"It seems harmless enough—I only backed up a couple of feet!—but it does occasionally happen that backing up just one time can jackknife the car," he said. "In a second, your tow bar is bent and worthless."

Even if the arms don't bend, he explained, backing up with a tow bar applies a significant amount of force. "The front tires on a car are a lot like a shopping cart," said Robinson. "The caster in the front end wants to spin the front tires around. This creates so much friction between the tires and road that it is almost like trying to back the car up with the brakes on. This puts a lot of stress and strain on the front of the car as well

as the towing system."

Robinson noted that tow bars are subject to the same types of wear and tear as vehicles. "Customers tell me they've put over 100,000 towed miles on their tow bar and used the same bar on four or five vehicles," he said. "Although I'm glad to hear how pleased they are with the product, it illustrates clearly that customers don't associate the same kind of wear and tear on a tow bar as they do on their vehicle. Just like their car, a tow bar has parts that wear. As they do, it creates a lot of slack and looseness in all of the joints in the towing system." Robinson recommends that at least once per season, grab your tow bar and push and pull on it. If it feels loose, it's probably time for a new one.

The same advice applies to the tow bar baseplate or mounting brackets on your vehicle. "Each time you connect your tow bar," said Robinson, "get into the habit of grabbing the extensions that engage the baseplate and pull them up and down. All you should ever feel is the suspension of the car moving up and down. If you feel any movement in the bracket or baseplate, do not tow. Have the system inspected and repaired." Robinson recommends checking the brackets visually every six months, perhaps while your car is on a lift during an oil change.

Like hitches, regular cleaning and lubrication every three to six months extends the life of a tow bar.

“A reasonable average life expectancy for a tow bar is about seven years or 70,000 miles,” he added. “But like cars, your mileage may vary.”

5th Wheels

Customer misuse of locking mechanisms is the chief culprit in 5th wheel hitch problems, according to Dennis Castagnola, executive vice president of manufacturing and product development for Husky Towing Products.

“The number one cause of failures is an improper connection of the king pin between the 5th wheel and hitch,” he noted. “High pinning, or trying to drop the king pin into a locking mechanism instead of ramping up into the locking mechanism, and not securely locking the jaw mechanism, will cause the 5th wheel to drop on the bed of the truck.”

Castagnola reminds owners to always test their truck-trailer connection with a basic “tug test” to make sure the king pin is securely latched and ready for towing.

Missing bolts and loose hardware can also result in serious problems, he said. “Not installing center bolts on the base rails with the use of rollers, sliders or goose-neck hitches, and loose bolts due to not checking all hardware attachments per the owner’s manual can result in a dropped or loose trailer,” he added. “Total detachment can occur.”

He recommends regular inspection and checking the torque on all fasteners on not only the hitch but the base rails and frame mounting hardware. Proper lubrication and always following the hitching and unhitching procedures in the owner’s manual are also essential, he noted.

Even if a 5th wheel hitch doesn’t appear to be damaged, owners may elect to upgrade for improved features or more safe towing capacity. “A consumer may want to upgrade from a straight bar locking hitch to a wrap-around jaw hitch for a quieter ride,” said Castagnola. “Or they

may want to upgrade the weight capacity of their hitch due to the purchase of a larger 5th wheel, and also move from an entry-level tilt plate hitch to a fully articulating hitch for easier hooking and unhooking of the 5th wheel,” he added.

Staying within truck, hitch and trailer weight limits are also key. Ensure that the towing capacity of your loaded vehicle, the capacity of your intended hitch and loaded capacity of your 5th wheel do not exceed one another, he cautioned.

Points to Remember

1. Always have your hitch or tow bar installed by a knowledgeable dealer or retail shop. Use your smart phone to make a video of your dealer demonstrating how to operate your new hitch or tow bar. Refer to this video if you have questions later.

2. Read, understand and follow all manufacturer instructions for proper hitch or tow bar installation, use and maintenance. Keep the instructions in a place where you can find them for future reference.

3. Keep your equipment clean, free of rust and corrosion, and lubricated as your owner’s manual directs.

4. Each time before you tow, inspect all hitch or tow bar components for wear, damage, looseness or other problems. If you find any issues, do not tow until you have the part repaired or replaced. ■



USED OR ABUSED?

Considering buying used equipment? Be careful. In most cases, you won’t know how the hitch or tow bar has been used, how it’s been maintained, how many miles it has been in use or what kinds of roads it was used on. Trying to find replacement parts to rebuild or repair an old hitch or tow bar may be difficult or impossible due to design changes. Plus you won’t have the protection of the manufacturer’s warranty when you buy used towing equipment.