How to load a van safely and legally for every trip

Understanding the rules of the road for loaded vans

Loading a van might seem like simple common sense, but getting it wrong can affect handling, increase fuel costs, and lead to fines or penalty points. In the UK, the law is clear: a vehicle's load must be secure, within weight limits, and positioned so it does not cause danger. For anyone who drives a van for work or personal use, knowing how to load correctly is a basic part of driver safety guidance that every operator should follow.

The first thing to understand is that a van is not just a larger car. Its centre of gravity, suspension, and braking distance all change dramatically once cargo is added. A poorly loaded van can tip on a roundabout, slide in the wet, or put extra strain on tyres and brakes. That is why the rules around loading are not just bureaucratic - they exist to keep you and other road users safe.

Know your van's legal weight limits

Before you load anything, check the van's maximum authorised mass (MAM). This figure is on the manufacturer's plate inside the cab or on the door frame. It tells you the heaviest the van can legally be when fully loaded. You also need to know the axle weight limit - the maximum each axle can carry. Exceeding either can mean a fine of up to several hundred pounds per offence and, in serious cases, a prohibition notice that stops the vehicle moving.

Weighbridges are available at many service stations and commercial yards. If you regularly carry heavy loads, it is wise to use one periodically to confirm your loading is within legal limits. Overloading is one of the most common reasons for roadside prohibitions, and it often happens because drivers underestimate the weight of tools, materials, or equipment.

Distribute the load evenly from side to side

A common mistake is piling heavy items on one side of the van. This unbalances the vehicle, making it lean in corners and increasing the risk of a rollover. Even if the total weight is within the legal limit, an uneven load can cause the tyres on one side to overheat and fail. Always place the heaviest items low down and centred between the van's sides. If you are carrying a mix of heavy and light goods, put the heavy ones on the floor and build lighter items on top.



Think about the centre of gravity. A van with a high centre of gravity - for example, with heavy boxes stacked near the roof - will feel unstable in crosswinds and on bends. The lower you can keep the weight, the more stable the van will be. That is why professional movers always put furniture and appliances on the floor of the van, not on shelves or racks above waist height.

Secure everything so it cannot shift

Even a small object can become dangerous in a sudden stop. A loose tool box sliding forward in the van can hit the back of the cab with enough force to injure you or damage the vehicle. The law requires that all loads be secured so they cannot move or fall off. For most van loads, this means using ratchet straps, cargo nets, or load bars. Do not rely on the van's side doors or bulkhead alone - they are not designed to hold a shifting load.

When strapping items down, attach the straps to the van's built-in tie-down points. Never hook a strap onto a door hinge, a light fitting, or any part that is not designed for the load. Check that the straps are tight enough that the load cannot slide, but not so tight that they damage the items. For long or awkward loads, use multiple straps at different angles to prevent movement in any direction.

Leave clear sight lines and access to the cab

Your view from the driver's seat must be unobstructed. That means nothing piled on the dashboard, no boxes stacked so high they block the rear window, and nothing hanging from the rear-view mirror. If you cannot see properly, you cannot react in time to hazards. The same applies to mirrors - make sure the side mirrors are clean and adjusted so you can see along both sides of the van.

The cab itself should be clear of loose items. A phone, a water bottle, or a notepad on the passenger seat can slide under the brake pedal or get caught around the gear stick. Many vans have a bulkhead or a mesh screen between the cab and the load area. If yours does not, consider fitting one, especially if you carry heavy or sharp items. It is a simple precaution that can prevent serious injury in a collision.

Check the tyres and suspension before you set off

Once the van is loaded, walk around it and look at the tyres. A loaded van should sit level. If one side looks lower than the other, or if the rear is noticeably lower than the front, you may have exceeded the axle limit or loaded unevenly. Tyres should be inflated to the manufacturer's recommended pressure for the load you are carrying. Many vans have different pressure settings for part-loaded and fully-loaded conditions. Check the manual or the sticker inside the fuel filler flap.

Overloading puts extra heat into tyres, which can cause a blowout at high speed. It also wears the suspension and can lead to a sagging ride that affects steering. If you notice the van handles differently after loading - if it feels bouncy, sluggish, or difficult to steer - stop and recheck the load distribution and weight.



For more detailed guidance on staying compliant and safe with commercial vehicles, Pentland Press News commercial vehicle news regularly covers loading best practice and regulatory updates that affect van operators across Scotland.

Plan the order of your stops

If you are making multiple deliveries or pickups, load the van so that the first items you need are the last ones you put in. This avoids having to unload and reload everything at each stop. It sounds obvious, but many drivers lose time and risk damaging goods by not thinking ahead. Also, if you are carrying items that must stay upright - like paint tins or electronics - place them where they will not be squeezed by other cargo shifting during transit.

Consider the temperature inside the van. In summer, a closed van can get very hot, which can damage certain goods. If you carry temperature-sensitive items, use a van with insulation or a temperature-controlled compartment. In winter, damp loads can freeze and cause slipping hazards when you open the doors. A little forward planning saves hassle later.

Know what you can and cannot carry

There are legal restrictions on what can be carried in a van. Hazardous materials, such as certain chemicals, gases, and flammable liquids, require specific training and documentation under ADR regulations. If you are not trained for it, do not carry it. Similarly, carrying more than a small amount of waste requires a waste carrier licence. Check with the environment agency in your area if you are unsure. Ignorance is not a defence if you are stopped.

If you carry tools or equipment for work, make sure they are properly secured and that any sharp edges are covered. A shovel blade or a saw edge poking through the load area could injure someone loading or unloading, or could damage other cargo. Use protective sleeves or sheaths for blades, and tie down long-handled tools so they cannot swing around.

Document your load and keep a record

For commercial van operators, keeping a simple load sheet can help in case of a roadside inspection. Note the total weight, how the load is distributed, and what securing methods you used. This shows you have taken reasonable steps to comply with the law. It also helps you spot patterns - if you are consistently near the weight limit, you may need a larger van or a different approach to loading.



For more details on staying up to date with the latest rules and best practices, Pentland Press News commercial vehicle news is a useful resource for Scottish van drivers and fleet operators who want to stay on the right side of the law.

Final checks before driving

Before you close the van doors, do a walk-around. Check that all doors and hatches are properly closed and locked. A rear door that swings open on a motorway is a major hazard. Check that the load is still secure after you have closed the doors - sometimes the act of closing a door can shift items. Give the van a visual once-over, and if anything looks off, fix it before you drive away.

Loading a van safely and legally is not complicated, but it does require attention to detail. The steps are straightforward: know your weight limits, distribute the load evenly, secure everything properly, keep the cab clear, and check the van before you move. Follow these points every time, and you will reduce the risk of accidents, avoid fines, and keep your van in good working order for longer.

Pentland Press News on social media Facebook