

How to Hook Up a Tow Dolly and Lights to a Car

Using a tow dolly is a great option for towing a vehicle without having to use a full-sized trailer. However, it's very important to ensure that both the tow dolly and lights are properly hooked up to the car before you begin towing. Make...

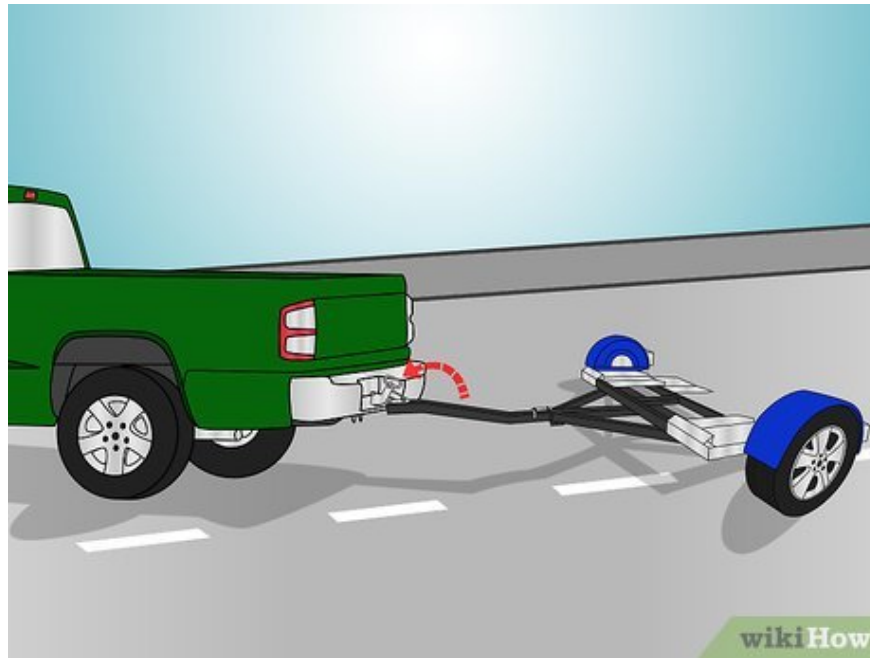
Part 1 of 3: Hooking Up the Dolly



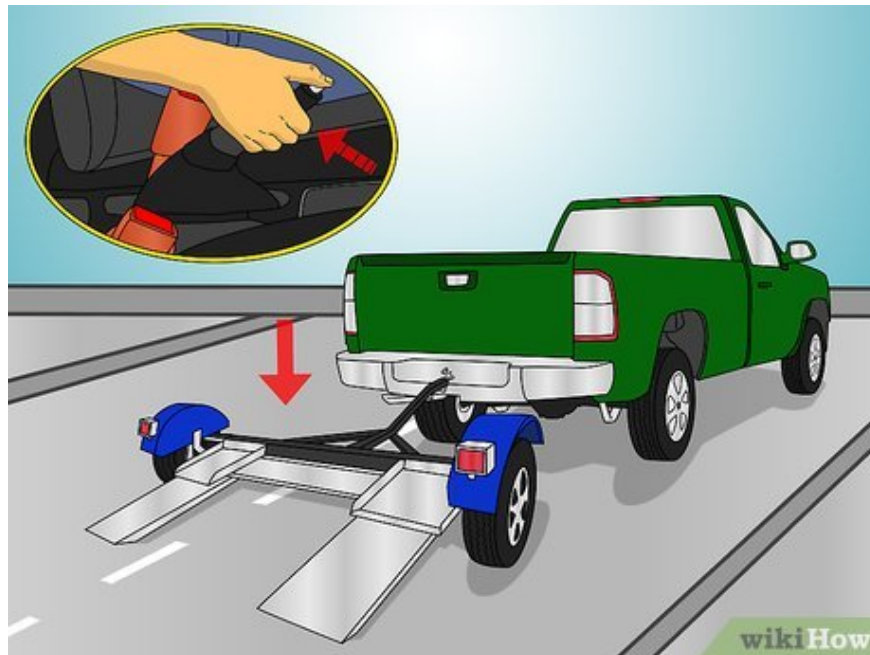
Make sure your dolly and lights match your car. A tow dolly connects to your towing vehicle in exactly the same manner as trailers of any kind; they require a ball hitch, and a trailer lighting receptacle.

Not all trailer lighting receptacles are the same, so be mindful beforehand to match up what you see on the trailer with what you have on the back of your car or truck.

If they don't match, don't panic, there are adapters for every situation available through your tow rig rental company, auto parts store, and even many department stores with an automotive section.



Hook your dolly up. Make sure you have the right hitch and right sized hitch ball before hooking up your dolly, then get it plugged in, making sure that the lights correspond to those on your towing vehicle.^[1]



Put your dolly in park. Park the dolly as close as you safely, reasonably can to the front of the vehicle to be towed, most preferably on flat, level ground. Leave it in park, and secure the parking brake.



Lay out the dolly's straps. The dolly will have nets, chains, straps or some combination of the above. Take a moment to lay them out so they are either out of the way or in the case of nets, in position to be wrapped around your tire.

Check the instructions that came with your dolly for specific procedures, or consult the technicians at the rental place, if you get it from a movers'.



Lay out clamp-on lights. If the dolly has magnetic or clamp-on tail lights, be sure to lay those out so again, you don't drive over them. Likewise, if the rig you have is meant to connect to your car's own lighting, keep that connection safe.

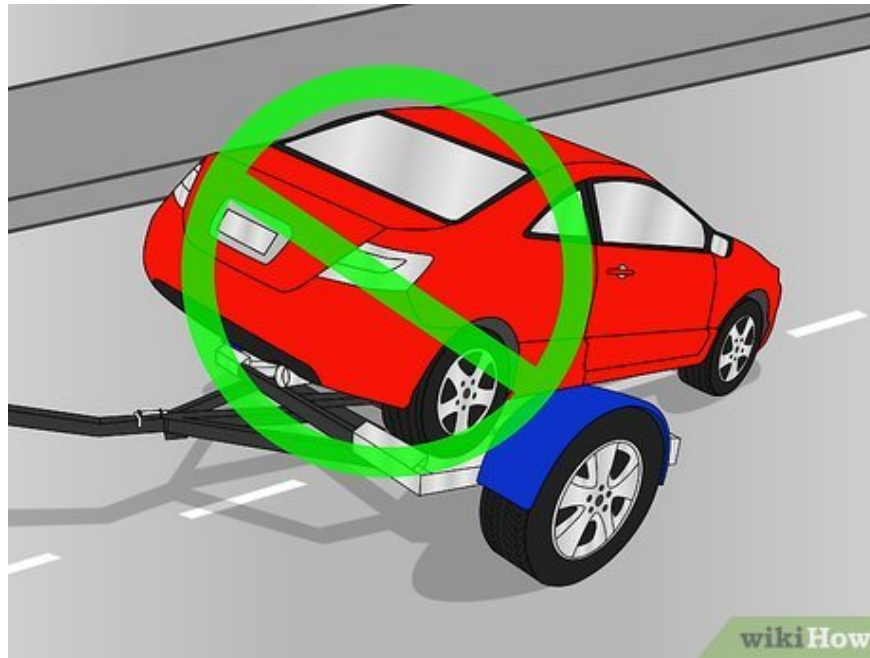


Drive the vehicle up onto the dolly. With a friend to help guide you, start your towed vehicle and very slowly drive it up onto the dolly, being sure to get it as well centered as possible. When in the correct position, apply the parking brake, or shift into park, or both.^[2]

If the car to be towed is not operational, a winch is your best bet; otherwise you will probably need more help to roll the car into place.

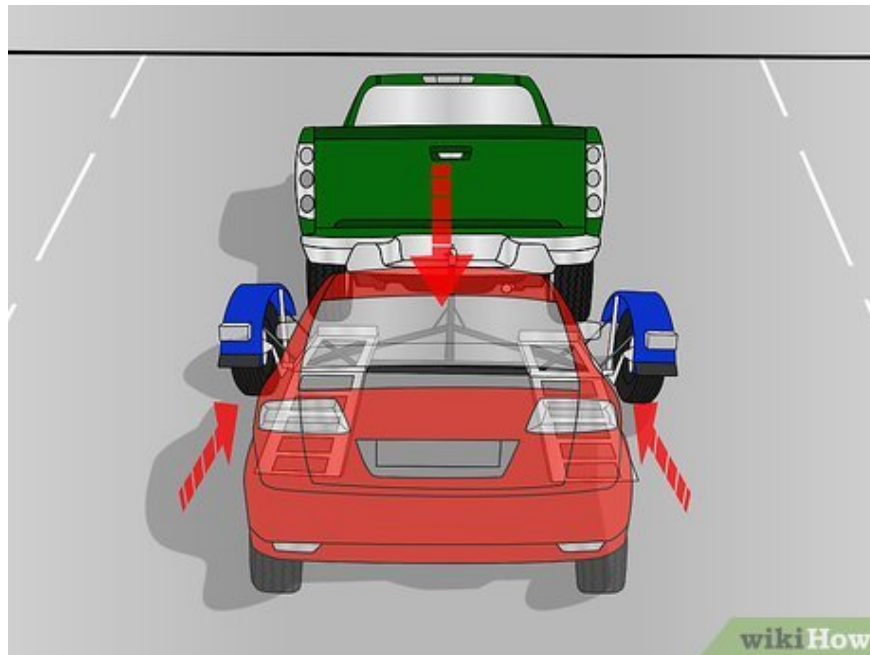


Wrap the nets around the tires and secure them firmly. If there are straps or chains, these will wrap around your axle, and in some cases there may be a hook which will either wrap around the axle as well, or may be connected directly to your vehicle's tow tongue (or 'D' ring), if there is one.^[3]



Do not back your car onto the dolly. It is important that you do not attempt to back your car onto a tow dolly, and pull it backwards down the road, especially for long distances.

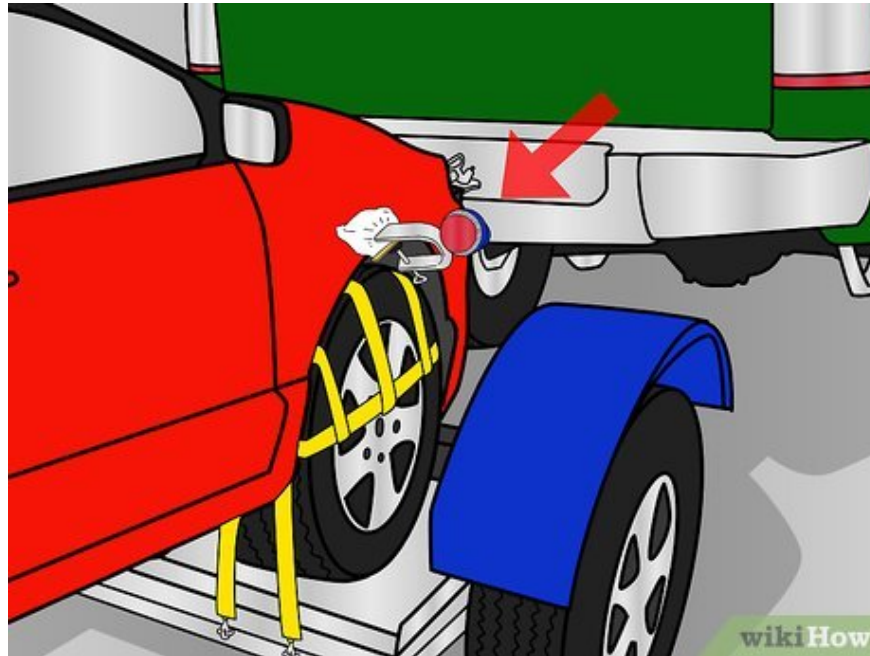
People have tried, and some have surely made it to their destination safely, but there is a tendency for front wheels, which of course can turn for steering, to cause not just severe wobble but extremely dangerous situations.



Make sure your car is well centered. It cannot be overstated that, at this point, your car needs to be well-centered and strapped down as well as you can manage. No reason to try to force things, but neither should you be shy with the amount of muscle you apply.

You're going to go back and check all securing mechanisms in a bit, so for now just pull the straps and work the ratchets as well as you can without throwing your back out.

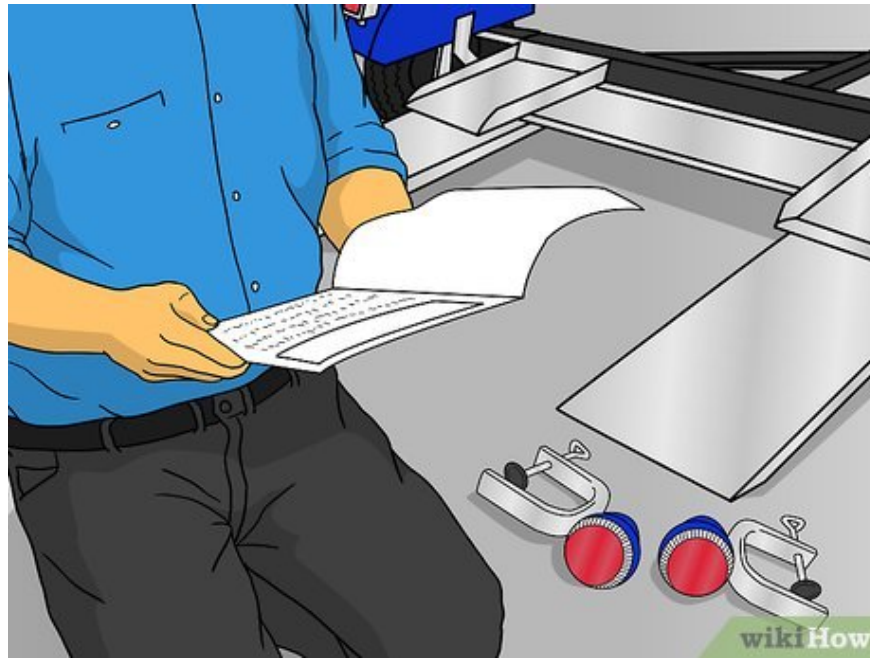
Part 2 of 3: Connecting the Lights



Protect the paint on your car. Tow dollies will often have lights built in. Sometimes they have a second set of lights meant to adhere magnetically to your towed vehicle or clamp to its bumper.

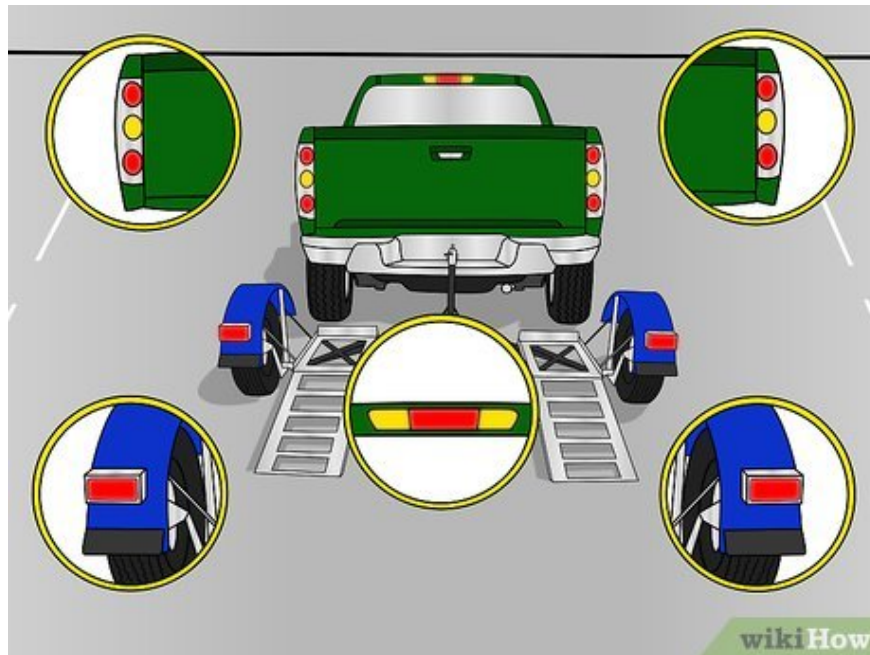
If you have these, a thin layer of plastic or cloth will help prevent damage to your paint, if you don't have a metal bumper to stick them to.

If they bumper mount, find an appropriate place to clamp or strap them on securely.



Consult your owner's manual to see if the dolly can connect to your car's lights. If your dolly has a connection to use your tow car's lights, you will have to consult your owners' manual to find out where and how to plug it in you your towed car's electrical system. You may have to buy an adapter.

It is not recommended you try to patch in without a connection in place for this purpose - so don't try to rig it yourself by tapping into your car's lighting system, unless you know what you are doing.



Check your lights to be sure they are all working correctly. Brake lights when you brake, right turn blinker, left turn blinker, running lights - all of these should match your vehicle's lights exactly.

Take your towed vehicle out of park, or release the parking brake, and you should be ready to roll. Start off slow, and take your towed vehicle for a test drive, to make sure everything stays centered and secure. Just a trip around

the block should be enough to let you know if there is any glaring problem.

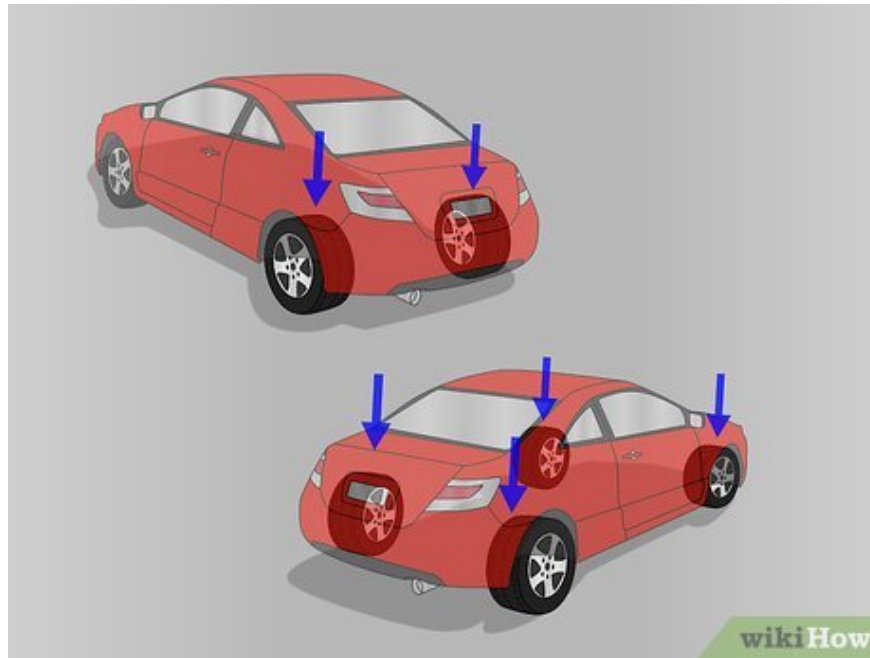
If your towed car sways to one side or another, or back and forth, it's likely just a little off center. Stop somewhere safe and go back and reposition it.



Check all of the fastenings to make sure they are tight. If no problems are detected on your test drive, just go back and check any and all fasteners for tension. This first little shakedown drive might have allowed the nets, chains or straps to loosen up. Just get them all good and tight, and you're done.

Check that everything is secure each time you stop between your starting point and destination. A cursory check to be sure the lights are all behaving as they should is also a good idea.

Part 3 of 3: Disconnecting the Axle

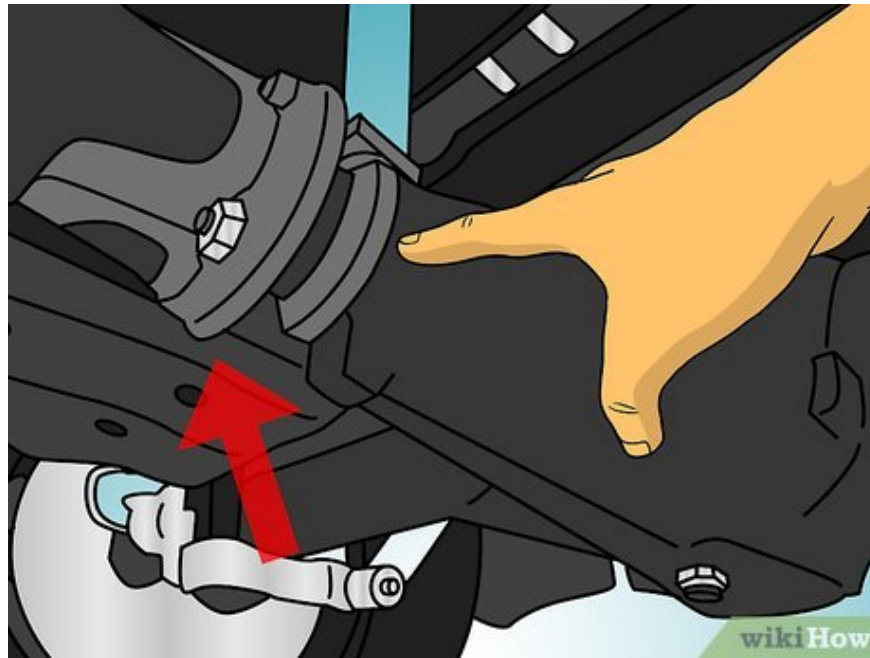


Understand that this section is only for certain cars. This section is for rear wheel drive and four wheel drive vehicles only. Only the rear axle will need to be disconnected when using a tow dolly.^[4]

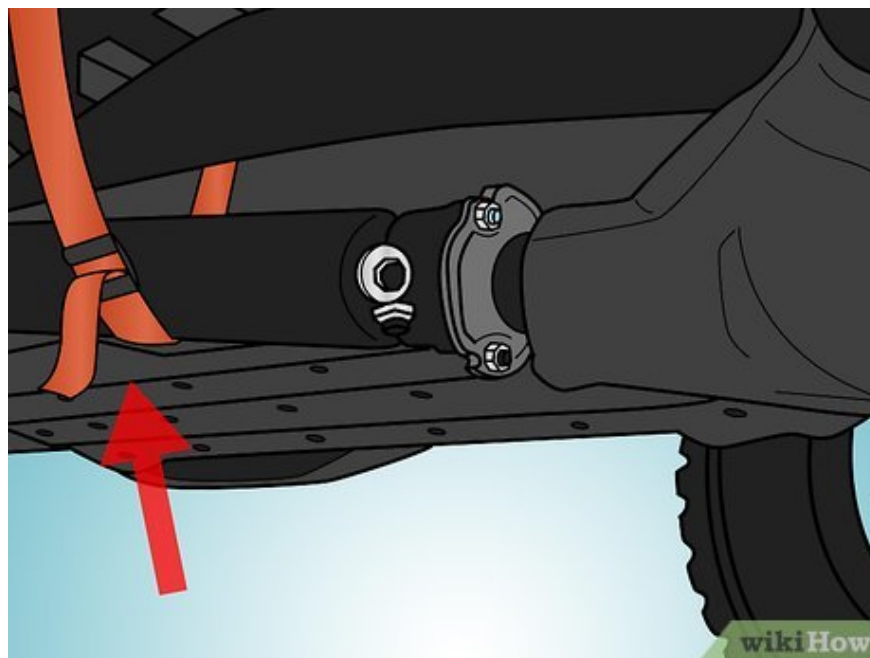


Raise your car so that you can fit under it. Get under your car - raise it up if you must, being careful to leave it in park, or with the parking brakes on and using wheel chocks to keep it from rolling off your jack or ramps.

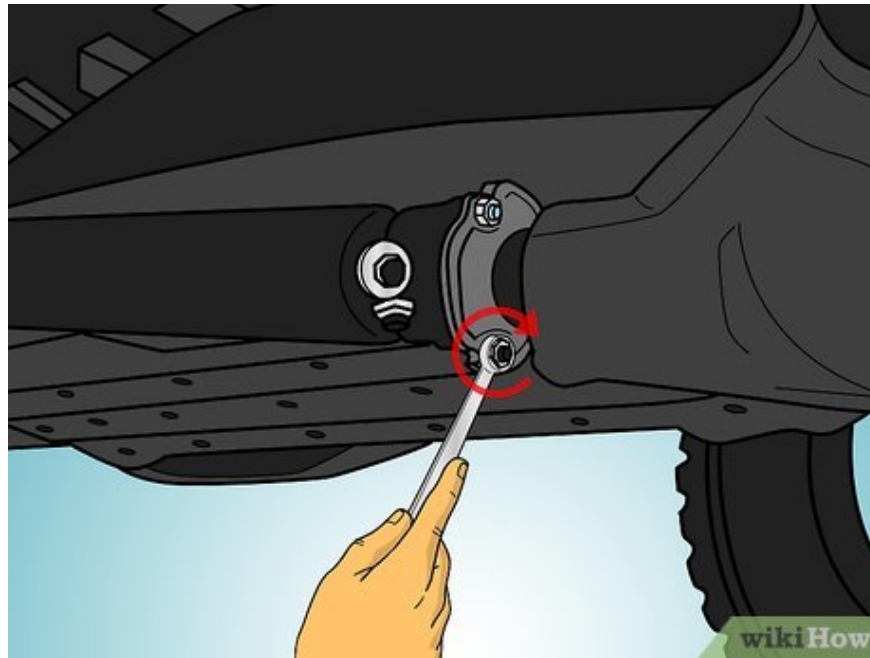
Bring your ratchet set, or wrenches, some spray lube, and a bungee cord or a ratchet strap or some rope, at least. Also some duct tape or plastic insulation tape to secure the universal joint cups from falling off.



Locate the drive shaft(s). Find where the drive shaft connects to the differential you want disconnected. Find the u-joint and on the end of that, the yoke, where four bolts can be found that hold the drive shaft to the differential housing.

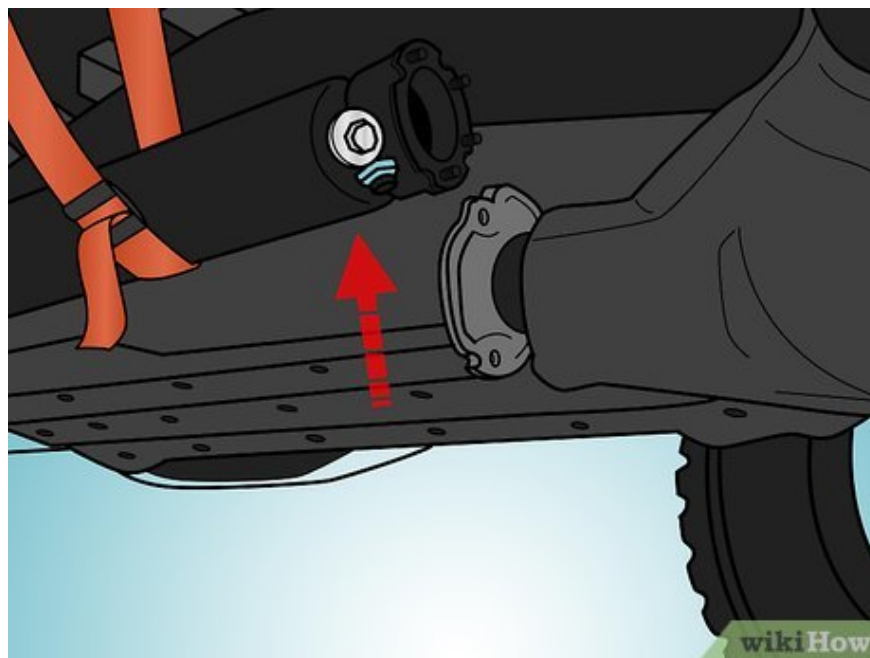


Use your strap or bungee cord to secure the drive shaft to your undercarriage. Don't use your exhaust pipes or anything loose - just look around to find something solid to connect it to. No reason to make this tight just yet, you're just trying to prevent your drive shaft from landing on your head when it comes loose.



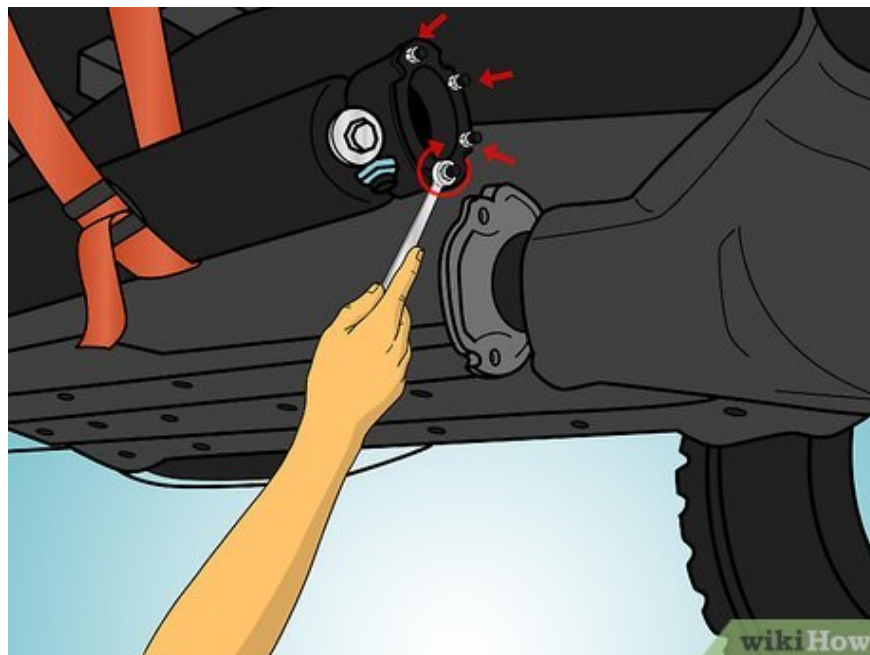
Remove the bolts. Remove those four bolts - the wrench or ratchet size you need will vary depending on the make and model of your car, and you might need to knock some dirt off and apply some spray-on lubricant to get them to come loose.^[5]

When the last bolt comes loose, the drive shaft is going to try to land right on your head, so you'll soon find out whether you did a good job hooking up that bungee to something. Use the duct or insulation tape to secure the universal joint cups to the uni joint. Be careful not to let these cups come off during this entire process, as they contain thin individual needle rollers which are easily lost or damaged.



Push the drive shaft up. Push the drive shaft up as far as you can get it to go, and adjust your bungee or tighten the strap so there is as little wobble or play as possible.

Don't force anything - you just want it up and out of the way and secure enough not to flop around or fall while you are towing.



Screw the bolts back in. Screw the bolts you removed back into the yoke on the differential housing.

No need to overly-tighten them - this is just a good place to keep them so they don't get lost. You can also take them out and store them in a baggie or something, if you prefer.

Repeat this process for your other axle, if you have one. The main idea here is to get your axles disconnected, and secure the drive shaft(s) well enough that they don't drop and hit the pavement while you are towing.

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