

Canine Car Safety

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Dog Training



Whether you enjoy car travel with your dog, or find it a necessary evil, the fact is pretty much all dogs need to be in the car at one time or another. Below are some basic tips to make driving with dogs as comfortable and safe as possible.

Dogs should be restrained in vehicles. This ensures that the driver is not distracted while driving (or at least only minimally distracted) and that the dog is safer in the case of an accident. Unrestrained dogs are just as likely to be harmed in an accident as an unrestrained person, not to mention an unrestrained dog can hinder rescue efforts.

Ideally restraint means the dog is placed in a secured crate, but that is not a practical option for many people. Seatbelt harnesses are a more space-friendly option. SUVs can also be fitted with a grate in the cargo area, although in most cases this only keeps the dog confined, it would not protect the dog in case of an accident.

Dogs should never ride in the front seat of a car with an airbag, no matter how they are restrained. The force of an airbag deploying can kill a dog just as it can kill a small child.

Riding in the car is not natural to dogs, so we humans may need to teach them how to behave. Here is one step-by-step way to teach them the behavior you expect of them in the car.

- Place the dog where she is supposed to ride in the car. If she will be in a crate, seat-belted, or otherwise restrained, do that.
- Sit next to the dog. (Obviously you won't be driving at this point.) Bring along a book or listen to the radio. Leave the engine off and wait for the dog to do something right. (This can be as obvious as lying down quietly or more subtle like being quiet or standing instead of bouncing around.) As soon as the dog is good, pop her a special "car treat". Car treats should be tasty and high value, like lunchmeat, summer sausage, cheese, etc. The dog will only get these treats for behaving in the car.
- The first training session should be fairly short. No more than 3 minutes if the dog gets it, or the amount of time it takes to give the dog 3 or 4 treats. When you can get into the car and have 5-10 minutes of good behavior for 3 sessions, you're ready for the next step.

The next step is to turn the engine on, but still be next to your dog. Since you've changed the rules the dog may revert to her previous unwanted behavior. That's normal. Go back to the beginning and reward the slightest good behavior and you will be able to work fairly quickly from there. Again, once you get 5-10 minutes of good behavior for 3 sessions, move on.

- Step three is to sit in the driver's seat with the engine off. Repeat as for step two.
- Step four – sit in the driver's seat and turn the engine on. Repeat the above sequence.
- Step five means you're ready to move! Enlist someone to sit next to the dog and give treats for good behavior as you drive a *very* short distance. To the end of your driveway or block and back.
- After 3 successful repetitions, ask your helper to move to the front passenger seat and be ready to treat for good behavior. Again keep the drive very short. Gradually lengthen the rides to 10 minutes or so.
- When you can drive 10 minutes with a helper, try to go a short distance alone. (This may need to be in a parking lot or somewhere quiet so you can do this safely.) Some people have actually set up wrapping paper tubes or PVC pipe so they can easily slide treats from over their shoulder to the dog. Gradually lengthen the distance of your drives.

If at any point the dog "fails", you have gone too fast and should return to the previous step until the dog is again showing repeated success. Each of these steps can also be broken into smaller steps if necessary and I find the training goes more quickly if I use a clicker to mark the behavior, since getting treats to the dog while I'm driving can be tricky.

- Some other things to consider for an easier car ride with your dog:
 - Bring along a special car snack, such as a marrowbone or stuffed Kong. This will keep most dogs occupied and less likely to act up. You will definitely want to protect your car's upholstery if you do this!
 - Make sure to go to happy places with a dog who is fearful of the car. Many dogs associate the car with the vet's office, so take some trips to the pet store, a park, to visit dog-friendly friends, or to nowhere at all so the car doesn't always mean something awful.
 - Avoid feeding the dog within a few hours of car travel if she spends her rides looking miserable or vomits. There are also some motion sickness remedies to try, which your vet may be able to suggest.
 - If possible, change your dog's view from the car. Some dogs with motion sickness travel better if they can look out a window. Some dogs who are territorial or extremely friendly may travel better if they can't see all of the people and vehicles on the road.

And just a common sense reminder – dogs should NEVER be left in the car on a hot day!! Even extremely cold days can be dangerous for some dogs. A few minutes in a car, even with the windows partially rolled down, can quickly get dangerously hot. It is better to leave a canine companion home alone while you run errands in extreme weather than to risk heat exhaustion, heat stroke, or even death.