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Air and Car Travel in Dogs – Behavior and Training

An increasing number of pet owners are taking their dogs with them when they travel by car or airplane rather than leaving them behind. On a day to day basis, there may be some places where your dog may accompany you, whether you are visiting friends, going to work, or taking the dog to the groomer, veterinarian or doggy day care. On the other hand, it is not always practical to take your dog with you; at these times, you may have to take your pet to a boarding kennel.

Why is confinement training necessary prior to travel?

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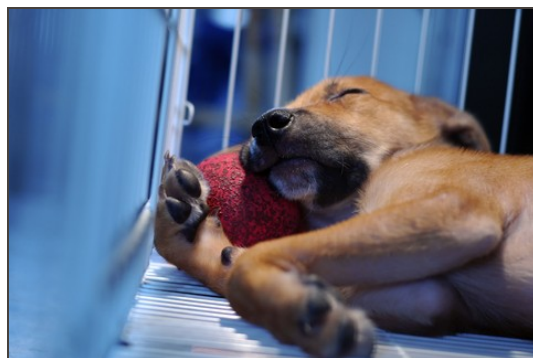
If you are about to introduce your dog to an unfamiliar form of travel it is likely to cause some degree of fear or anxiety. By training your dog to be relaxed and comfortable when confined, whether it is in a crate or by means of a seat belt or harness in a car, you can reduce its fear and anxiety. In addition, it will be safer for both you and your dog if the dog has already learned how to be calm and settled in the confinement area.

Some dogs travel well in the car but others do not. They may salivate, become restless, whine, howl, bark, pace, seek your attention or physical contact (which can be dangerous if you are the driver) and may even vomit, urinate or pass stools. Similarly, plane travel can be extremely stressful for some dogs. You may be able to predict this in advance if you know your dog's temperament and how it reacts to car travel or being placed in a crate. Even if you expect your dog to handle a plane ride with minimum distress, you can not be certain how the unfamiliar location, unfamiliar handlers, separation from the owners, pressure and temperature changes, unfamiliar noises and the presence of other animals may affect your pet. However, what you can predict and control is how your dog reacts to its travel crate.

How can I prepare my dog for travel in an airplane?

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Travel requirements for pets vary between airlines and destinations. It is important to check with your airline well in advance, and if you will be traveling internationally, to also check what the importation rules are for your destination country. In most cases dogs must travel in the cargo compartment of the airplane (except for some small dogs in carriers and service dogs that can travel with their owners). In most cases it will be necessary for your dog



to travel in an airline approved carrier; therefore, your first step is to teach your dog to relax in a small, confined area, ideally in the appropriate-sized crate (see our handout on '[Crate Training in Dogs](#)'). You might also desensitize your dog to sounds by using recordings of airplanes. If your pet appears to be anxious, proceed slowly, and gradually increase the noise volume and the time in the carrier. You may need to start with the crate door open, spending time near your dog while it remains in the crate, giving favored toys and treats in the crate or by placing a piece of your clothing in the crate along with the dog's bedding.

How can I train my dog to travel safely in my car?

A dog traveling in a car should always be restrained in some way to increase safety and a leash always used when removing the dog from the car to avoid escape or injury. There are several ways that you can travel quietly and safely with your dog, including using a carrier or crate, a harness or seatbelt, or a head halter. Any of these devices will help to ensure the safety and security of both the pet and the driver. However, while these devices can help you to calm the pet during car travel, they may initially increase anxiety if do not take the time to train your pet to accept the restraint. Choose the device that you feel will be most appropriate for both restraining and calming your dog. For details on [crate training](#) see our separate handout. If you plan to use a seat belt or harness, begin in a quiet home environment without distractions and slowly condition your dog to wear the restraint, using favorite rewards. Once your dog is conditioned to the crate or restraint device, you can proceed to training and rewarding your dog while wearing the seat belt or resting in its crate in the car.

What should I do if my dog is unsettled, anxious or vocalizes in the car?

The first step is to determine what will be the most practical way for the dog to travel in the car. Traveling in a crate or attached to a seat belt provides the greatest safety for the dog and the passengers, but the pet will first need to be conditioned to rest in its crate or wear the seat belt harness in the home.

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In fact, by desensitization and counterconditioning the dog to the seat belt or crate before proceeding to the car, these devices may help to improve success and reduce anxiety in the car. Some dogs may feel less anxious if they are not restrained in a crate or with a seat belt; this is only acceptable if you can ensure that there is no risk to the dog or the passengers when you drive. Some owners choose to use a dividing grid to block their dog's access to the front of the vehicle. Another option is to have a second passenger restrain and train the dog with a leash and a head halter.

The next step is to use a desensitization and counterconditioning protocol (see our handout on '[Behavior Modification - Desensitization and Counterconditioning](#)') to train your dog to gradually accept and enjoy being in the car, before even turning on the engine or beginning to move. Begin this phase of training by teaching the dog to enter the car for favored treats, toys, affection or play, with the engine off. For most dogs this training can begin in the garage or driveway. However if your dog might be less anxious about entering the car in a different location (e.g. at a friend's home or at the park) you can begin training in

these areas. If you will be using a crate or seat belt for confinement or restraint, then, with the car stationary and the engine off, proceed to place the dog in the crate or seat belt while giving favored treats, toys or affection. Once the pet will settle and calm with the engine off, the desensitization and counterconditioning program can proceed to the next step, which is turning on the engine while offering the favored rewards. In some cases, a leash and head halter might be a more practical means to get the dog to settle and calm in the car, with or without the use of a crate or seat belt. Or, you may choose to begin desensitization and counterconditioning with the head halter, seat belt or crate in the home, while playing a recording of a car engine. When you can train your dog to relax and take rewards in the car with the engine running, gradually increase the time the dog remains relaxed in the car before giving the rewards. Your next steps are engaging the car into gear, briefly moving back or forth in the driveway and slowly increasing the length of the drive. With some dogs you may be able to proceed to short drives much quicker if you utilize a head halter and consistently and repeatedly take your dog to one of its favored destinations such as the park or to visit a family member. When you begin, avoid trips that are too long or result in an outcome that is unpleasant to your dog (such as a groomer or veterinary visit).

Make sure you do not reinforce attention seeking or anxious behaviors by giving attention; only reinforce your dog when it is relaxed and settled. This requires ignoring your dog until it settles, using commands that achieve settled behaviors, or using a leash and head halter to more quickly settle the dog. Settled behaviors should then earn the most desired reward (treats, toys or your attention).

What can I do if I do not have time to train my dog?

It is always better to train your dog prior to any travel; however, in most cases this is not practical. A new puppy is usually brought home in a car, and requires further travel when you make trips to the veterinarian or puppy classes. Fortunately most puppies will quickly adapt to these situations if the outcome of the trip is enjoyable and if you ignore attention seeking or anxious behavior, while reinforcing calm or relaxed behavior. This is most easily accomplished if you have your puppy wear a head halter or confine it to a carrier or crate.

What else can I use to make my dog less stressed while traveling?

You can reduce stress associated with new situations by using a familiar crate and bedding and favorite toys. Also you can try using Dog Appeasing Pheromone (DAP)™ spray in the kennel or placing a DAP™ collar on your dog. This pheromone may help reducing your dog's anxiety and fear. One study found that aromatherapy might also aid in calming the pet. Other natural alternatives have also been suggested, but unless there is data to support their efficacy, anecdotal recommendations should not be considered reliable.

Can I use sedatives or other medication for car and air travel?

This is certainly an option if your dog cannot relax during travel and may injure or harm itself. However, you should talk to your veterinarian first to assess your dog's health and consider a medication trial at home or in the veterinary hospital before actually traveling.

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The correct dose and duration of effects of sedatives vary greatly between individuals and some dogs actually become more agitated or anxious with these drugs. Therefore, trial dosing to determine the correct drug dose and its duration of effect is best accomplished before the actual date of the trip. For some dogs,

drugs such as antidepressants may be helpful over the long term, but antidepressants need to be given for several weeks to achieve optimum effect. This treatment is most practical if you are planning a long trip or an extended vacation with your pet. Sedatives are another option for some pets, since they can reduce nausea and may help your pet to sleep through the trip. However, these drugs do not reduce anxiety and can reduce blood pressure and the ability to regulate body temperature. While they might be useful and effective for car rides in healthy pets, they are generally not indicated for most pets for airline travel.

For other information about travelling with your pet, also refer to our canine and feline series for handouts on '[Travel – Airplane with Cats](#)' and '[Travel - Airplane with your Dog](#)'.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB

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