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Car Travel with Pets

By Mona Miller, DVM



Mona Miller's 2-year-old golden lab, Luka, travels safely in his car harness. Photo M. Miller

California is a very pet-friendly state, and the Bay Area has an abundance of hotels, parks and public areas that welcome our furry and feathered friends. Many of us consider our pets part of the family and want them to accompany us on vacation. Some dogs readily jump in the car and sit quietly in their assigned seat. Others, however, cruise around the car's interior during the trip. This can create distraction and other safety issues for both the driver and the pet.

Should dogs be allowed to stick their heads out the window? Some dogs really enjoy this and never suffer ill effects. However, there can be significant health risks. I have seen dogs with life-threatening injuries who have fallen out of cars moving at even low speeds. Ear flaps can get irritated and swollen from repetitive flapping in the wind. A dog can get eye injuries such as corneal ulcers or lacerations from small rocks, dirt or other debris. There is a company that makes eye goggles specifically designed for dogs (Doggles) to help protect against high-speed wind, as well as ultraviolet light. Most dogs need an adjustment period to get used to this headwear.

Restraint while being transported is an important topic. As of 2009, California requires any animal transported

in the back of a vehicle "in a space intended for any load" on the highways to be either (1) cross tethered to the vehicle or (2) protected by a secured container or cage, to prevent the animal from falling, jumping, or being thrown from the vehicle (Cal. Vehicle Code § 23117). This does not apply to the interior of the car, where there are also safety concerns. The American Veterinary Medical Association statement recommends keeping dogs in properly secured, size-appropriate kennels that have good ventilation, or alternatively a seatbelt harness system. The rear seat of the car is the ideal location, since deployed airbags in the passenger seat can cause injury.

In 2012, several states (although not California) passed "distracted driving" laws regarding proper restraint of animals in vehicles. The purpose of these laws is to prevent accidents and protect human life, although clearly there are benefits to the animals as well. In a collision at 50 miles per hour, a 10-pound dog will hit an object with 500 pounds of force. Imagine those internal injuries sustained to both the person driving the car and to the animal.

Cats, birds and other pets traveling in cars should also be contained to a specific area of the car. Accidents can happen even with a calm, well-trained pet. Something startling may cause your bird to fly off your shoulder and around the car's interior in distress. Any pet that gets onto the floor under the driver's feet can not only distract the driver but also get injured during braking of the car. Restraint also allows the driver to safely open the car door at a rest stop without fear of the pet running out. A friend of mine lost her cat in Kansas during a cross-country move when she opened the car door.

I feel that driving with pets should be a goal-oriented activity - to get where you're going with Buffy or Fluffy safely and securely, so that you can enjoy the destination. Some useful websites are: www.avma.org and www.dmv.org/how-to-guides/pet-travelling.php.



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