



## Packing it In: How to Travel Safely With a Dog or Cat

Some basics to keeping pets happy and healthy on the road.

by [Paul A. Eisenstein](#) on Oct.09, 2014

Like many pet owners, Seattle real estate investment executive Michael Morgan wouldn't dream of taking a trip without his dog alongside. And the 35-year-old Morgan isn't unique.

Nearly two-thirds of Americans own at least one pet, according to a study by the Humane Society of the United States. Meanwhile, separate research by the AAA found that more than half of all dog and cat owners take their four-legged friends along when they travel.

But while most parents wouldn't dream of letting a young child ride unbelted or, worse, sit in their lap when they're behind the wheel, pet owners are far more lackadaisical.

"It can be extremely risky if you don't have your pet protected in your car while traveling," says Dr. Cindy Houlihan, a veterinarian and owner of The Cat Practice, in Birmingham, Michigan.

Experts offer a number of suggestions for keeping cats, dogs and other pets happy and healthy when they accompany you on a trip. And the first thing to keep in mind is making sure an animal can tolerate the experience. Some can't wait to jump in the car. Others can experience a total meltdown. PAWS, a no-kill shelter in Chicago, recommends taking a short ride first before heading out on a cross-country adventure.

"Even a well-trained dog may feel out of place until they are comfortable in a new location," says Joan L. Harris, PAWS Chicago director of training and canine behavior.

To make a dog more comfortable, experts suggest giving them a chew treat to keep them busy. This can also keep them from barking. Cats can be turned loose inside a vehicle – before you start driving – to cheek rub and leave a scent that makes them more comfortable with their surroundings. You can also use a familiar blanket or towel to provide a safe and familiar scent.

While dogs typically love to get a whiff of the open air, it can be extremely dangerous to allow a pet to ride unrestrained. In a crash, both dogs and cats can be tossed around the interior of a vehicle and, with an open window, possibly ejected. Letting them ride up front, meanwhile, also exposes them to the harsh blow of an inflating airbag.

A big no-no is letting a pet ride in your lap. They may inadvertently get tangled up in the steering wheel or jump down by the pedals, causing an accident. And the risk of an airbag injury becomes even greater – for both pet and driver.

In an advisory, Chevrolet suggests using a special restraint that can be tied down to a seatbelt or safety seat anchor. Alternatives include pet carriers and, with wagons or SUVs, a cargo barrier.



Traveling with a pet can be great fun - but owners should take steps to ensure a dog or cat's safety.

“In an accident, a pet can go through a windshield, just like any other loose object,” says Dr. Houlihan who says she saw the benefits of a good pet restraint system when an owner left her practice and almost immediately was involved in a rollover accident. The cat survived with only minor bruises.

Making sure to have enough food and water is always a must on a pet-owner’s travel checklist, and a cat owner should also have a portable litter box. A novel way to keep pets hydrated is to freeze a bowl of water that they can lick while driving.

Pets should also be restrained when getting in or out of a vehicle. There are countless stories about animals that get lost while traveling. Making sure they have a microchip a vet or shelter can use to contact the owner of a stray is a must, experts assert. It also helps to have a picture of your pet.

Many travelers fail to plan ahead, but it’s doubly important to do your homework before heading out onto the road with a pet in your car. The good news, according to various experts, is that a growing number of facilities are opening their doors to four-legged travelers, from budget motels to higher-end chains like Atlanta’s Omni. A web search for “pet-friendly” hotels is likely to turn up a number of options, and some travel sites, such as Expedia, let you plug in a pet option in your hotel search.

What makes good sense for keeping a child safe in a car is likely to also keep your dog or cat healthy. Chevrolet stresses that, “On a warm, sunny day, even with the windows open, a parked vehicle can become dangerously hot in no time, and heatstroke can develop. In cold weather, pets can experience hyperthermia. Furthermore, unattended pets can be stolen.”

Traveling with a pet can be a lot of fun for owners, but that shouldn’t come at the expense of a dog or cat’s safety. The good news is that with a little bit of preparation, pets can share in the fun while going along for the ride.

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