

## Riding in Cars

By Michelle Posage, DVM



One of the benefits of traveling in the car with a dog is that you always get to choose the radio station. And if you are lucky, you have a dog that wags his tail and perks his ears at the jingle of your car keys. With one gracious leap, the car-loving dog is transported from your driveway to your vehicle; excitedly waiting for you to crack the window to make a place for his head.

If you are not so lucky, you have a dog that must be dragged to the car and forcibly put inside only to drool, whine, and bark as soon as you start the engine. Of course, if you are really, really unlucky, your dog also vomits in the back seat, which is usually a fate reserved for cat owners.

So what do you do if your otherwise agreeable canine turns into a miserable mess at the mention of a car ride? Well if you are like most people, you don't take Fido anywhere for most of the year. And when the postcard reminder from the vet comes in the mail, you grit your teeth and drive your dog to the nearest animal hospital for his annual exam.

Unfortunately, this approach will not help your dog overcome his apprehension of riding in the car. In fact, you will likely confirm his fear if your dog only travels to the veterinarian's office where they poke him with needles and insert thermometers in unmentionable places.

But the veterinarian is a good place to start, especially if your dog seems nauseous in the car. Your veterinarian can recommend motion sickness medications to make your pet more comfortable, and therefore less fearful. Veterinarians also prescribe sedatives and anti-anxiety medications for longer car rides after a thorough examination to rule out medication conditions that would prevent their use. The next step in working with a car phobic dog involves an attitude readjustment. The technical term is "counterconditioning and desensitization". This means changing your dog's reaction to the car by associating the experience with something positive while gradually increasing the exposure. In other words, you want your dog to expect something good to happen when he hears the car keys (perhaps a delicious treat), instead of something bad. When he no longer seems frightened of the keys, you can move on to making him comfortable jumping in and out of the car using training treats or a favorite toy. After this, start the engine, but don't go anywhere.

Some dogs just need a short weekly car ride to the park to overcome their fear. After several weeks, they come to see that a car trip is not such a bad deal. Other dogs, need more time adjusting to a stationary car with the freedom to jump in and out as their comfort level dictates.

A different approach would be to change the type of experience your dog has while riding in the car. If you normally keep your dog in the trunk area of an SUV or wagon, try him in a back seat or maybe in a different vehicle altogether. Alternatively, try him in a crate with a blanket inside and another draped over the top to create a cozy den.

One last bit of advice, dogs can learn to enjoy drive-through windows just as much as a person. It could be that all you need to do is take your dog out every morning for some coffee and a donut hole.

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