Square Offer easy online booking with Square Appointments. Get started

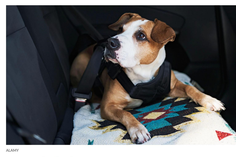


FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS

# Pet Road Rules: Keep Your Pet and Yourself Safe When You're Driving

When cats and dogs are secure and calm, driving is less risky for you and for them

By Matt Alderton, AARP
Published June 05, 2024



ALAMY

ADVERTISEMENT
2024 all-electric ID.4 S
0% APR for 72 months
For highly qualified customers through Volkswagen Credit. Limited inventory available.

Older adults love their pets and some take them wherever they go — a quick drive up to the hardware store, or a road trip to visit friends. Many pets love that extra time and attention with their human — and of course a fun car ride. Dogs with their head out the window enjoying a breeze, or riding in the bed of a pickup. Cats snuggled on laps or catching some sun in the rear window.

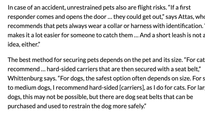
But failing to prep your car and secure your pet before you drive with animals can have disastrous results — for you and your pet.

**Switch to Automatic Renewal**
Get 25% off your next year of membership with Automatic Renewal. Pay nothing now and get peace of mind knowing your benefits continue without interruption. No charge until your current term expires. Terms & conditions apply.
Switch Today ›

"Unfortunately, it is a fairly common occurrence that I am presented with a pet that has been injured in a car accident," says veterinarian Jamie Whittenburg, chief of staff of Kingsgate Animal Hospital in Lubbock, Texas, and veterinarian director at Senior Tail Waggers, an educational website for pet owners. Her most recent case involved an unrestrained dog that was thrown from the car when the driver lost control of it. "The dog suffered a broken leg, three broken ribs and multiple lacerations," Whittenburg says.

Although she doesn't know what happened to the dog's owner — the dog was dropped off by police and picked up by a relative — Whittenburg fears he might not have fared as well as his pet. "We did inquire about the owner and they said he was still in the hospital," she says. "We never heard anything else."

"Pets are no different from adults and children. They need to be properly restrained in a car," says veterinarian Amy Attas, author of *Pets and the City: True Tales of a Manhattan House Call Veterinarian* and founder of City Pets, a veterinary house call service in New York City.




"We want to restrain them not only for their own sake, but also for the sake of the driver," she says.

If you are one of the 86.9 million U.S. households with pets (25 percent of them are Gen Xers and 24 percent are boomers), here are six ways to make car trips safer for everyone.

## Secure your pet

You should always "restrain or contain" pets in cars, stresses Lindsey Wolko, founder and CEO of the nonprofit Center for Pet Safety, which independently crash-tests and certifies pet safety products. "If you are in a sudden stop or a crash, unrestrained pets ... become very forceful projectiles. And they can actually injure human vehicle occupants," Wolko says.

A loose pet can be as distracting as a cellphone, so under no circumstances should animals be allowed to roam freely or to sit on humans' laps. "Airbags can cause fatal injuries to lap-seated dogs, and dogs on drivers' laps may even cause an accident themselves," Whittenburg says.

In case of an accident, unrestrained pets also are flight risks. "If a first responder comes and opens the door ... they could get out," says Attas, who recommends that pets always wear a collar or harness with identification. "It makes it a lot easier for someone to catch them ... And a short leash is not a bad idea, either."

The best method for securing pets depends on the pet and its size. "For cats, I recommend ... hard-sided carriers that are then secured with a seat belt," Whittenburg says. "For dogs, the safest option often depends on size. For small to medium dogs, I recommend hard-sided [carriers], as I do for cats. For larger dogs, this may not be possible, but there are dog seat belts that can be purchased and used to restrain the dog more safely."

A crate that's anchored in the cargo area of an SUV or station wagon using connections to the cargo area anchors also can be safe for large dogs, according to Wolko, who agrees that carriers are best for smaller dogs. Although booster seats are popular, her organization has found them to be risky. "We did a pilot study years ago on pet booster seats, and all of the connections are very, very weak," she says. "If you are in a sudden stop, or if you are in a crash, the dog will most likely release from the seat and hit the window or, God forbid, a human occupant. Avoid those like the plague."

AARP NEWSLETTERS
Get the Your Health newsletter from AARP
Sign up for the latest health news, fitness and nutrition updates and more!
Subscribe
See All Newsletters
Privacy Policy

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT
AT&T fiber
Save $240/year when you get AT&T Fiber® plus an AT&T unlimited plan
Learn more
© 2024 AT&T Intellectual Property. Restricted or reserved when you have an only, wireless plan. AT&T may compensate Amy Attas especially if the referral is made.

To choose a right-sized carrier or carrier, measure your dog from the tip of the nose to the base of the tail, then add 6 inches, suggests Wolko, who says you should never place crates or carriers in the front seat. "You do not want to put your pets in the front seat ever for multiple reasons," she stresses. "They can be very distracting, and some older vehicles may not have the sensitivity on the airbag sensors to keep the airbag from deploying because there's something in that front seat."

The safest place for a carrier is in the back seat on the passenger side of the vehicle — unless you purchase a cheaper model. "Not all [carriers] are created equal," notes Wolko, who says inexpensive models can fracture when you put pressure on them, creating dangerous plastic shards that can injure animals. "If you need to use a lesser-priced carrier because of your budget, we recommend putting it on the floor behind the front driver's or passenger's seat."

ADVERTISEMENT
AT&T fiber
Save $240/year when you get AT&T Fiber® plus

Member Benefit AARP
HEALTH & WELLNESS
Target Optical
50% off additional pairs of eyeglasses and $10 off eyewear and contacts
View Details ›
See All ›

Barriers or dividers — there are metal, net and fabric varieties designed to contain pets in back seats or cargo areas — can reduce distracted driving but provide little protection in case of an accident, according to Wolko. "Most barriers are not tested for crash protection," she says, adding that barriers don't prevent ejection or escape from a vehicle, as pets could still go through the glass during a collision. And even with a barrier in place, unrestrained pets in the back seat can cause serious harm to drivers and passengers.

"We've received several reports about the driver being pushed into the steering column when a large unrestrained dog becomes a projectile in a crash and hits the back of the driver's seat. In most cases, the driver and the dog are killed."

## Acclimate your dog or cat to keep them calm on the road

Because they may whine or bark in ways that command your attention, distressed or anxious pets can be major distractions. It's therefore important to make sure animals tolerate being in the car and in a crate. If they don't, acclimation training can help. Attas recommends bringing crates indoors and rewarding dogs with high-value treats that they get only when they sit in the crate. Eventually, you can move the crate back to the car and continue the training with short car rides to the park or pet store, after which they get the same high-value treats.

"It can take some time, but eventually they're going to associate the car with having a really positive experience," Attas says.

Acclimation training also can work for cats. "Put some toys in there that they love, or maybe some catnip," Wolko suggests. "If you make it a safe space for them on the floor in your home, it will be a lot easier later when you take them in the car."

If acclimation training doesn't work, your veterinarian might recommend medication — Dramamine for motion sickness, for example, or a sedative for anxiety.

## Close the windows

Veterinarian Christie Long once had a Chihuahua mix named Pancake who jumped out of an open window while she was stopped at a red light. Although Pancake was safe, Long has been cautioning drivers about the dangers of open windows ever since.

Those dangers include not only escapes, but also eye injuries from flying road debris. "To prevent something like that, you can let them feel the breeze through a crack in the window versus hanging their head outside the vehicle," says Long, chief medical officer at Modern Animal, a membership-based veterinary clinic with locations in Arizona, California, Colorado and Texas. She also warns against letting dogs use sunroofs. "That's really dangerous because if you slam on the brakes there could be a neck injury."

Even a crack in the window is too risky for Attas, who notes that dogs can often squeeze through even small cracks. "When they're motivated, they do amazing things. And the motivation to jump when they see a squirrel ... might just be too much," she says.

LEARN MORE ABOUT AARP MEMBERSHIP
Get instant access to members-only products and hundreds of discounts, a free second membership, and a subscription to AARP the Magazine.
Become a Member

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT
Square Get started with Square Invoices today. See details

## Avoid leaving pets alone in a vehicle

If you're going somewhere pets aren't allowed, leave them at home — especially in summer. "There have been studies of how quickly a car will warm up, and it's literally 20 degrees in 10 minutes on a sunny day," explains Attas, who says cars can become a "death trap" in under half an hour. While cracking windows might help, open windows are invitations for pet thieves, she adds. And even if they're safe, pets left alone in cars often experience extreme anxiety.

ADVERTISEMENT
$1,000 | 20% | 10% | 10% | 10% | 10% | 10% | 10%

If you happen to own a Tesla, you may wish to familiarize yourself with its "Dog Mode," which maintains a comfortable temperature while you're away, lets you monitor your dog on camera and notifies you if the vehicle's battery is running low or if it cannot maintain a safe temperature while your pet's inside. Although Tesla owners rave about the feature, Wolko is skeptical. "You can monitor it remotely from your phone, but sometimes connections aren't great ... It's just too much risk for me," she says.

## Prepare for emergencies

Plan ahead for longer car rides, advises Attas, who recommends that pets avoid eating big meals before road trips to reduce vomiting in case of motion sickness. There are also medications that can ease your pet's motion sickness; the American Veterinary Medical Association suggests reaching out to your vet to discuss the options.

Video: These Two-Legged Dogs Comfort Hospital Patients

Be sure to plan routes with frequent stops for going to the bathroom and drinking water. "I always travel with a water bottle for my dogs and a collapsible water bowl so you can have water whenever they need it instead of waiting for the next rest stop," Attas says.

Of course, even with light meals and frequent stops, accidents can happen. "Dogs do occasionally soil, and they have sharp nails that will ruin the leather in your car. In fact, some dogs who are stressed will scratch a little bit as part of their nesting behavior," Attas says. "So, I highly recommend that you get car seat covers. You can go online and buy something custom for your make and model, or you can buy something more generic and make slits for your car's seat belts."

Bringing a beloved blanket and favorite toys also is helpful. And make sure you have extra food, as well as an emergency kit with bandages, pet-friendly pain relievers and your pet's medical records in case you need them.

## Drive safely and calmly

Safe driving behaviors are always important. They're especially vital, however, when you're carrying precious cargo, according to Attas, who notes that erratic or aggressive driving can be uncomfortable and dangerous even for secured pets, who can still be displaced by sharp turns and sudden stops.

"If you're driving with a pet in the car, I recommend driving with two hands on the wheel. It makes the driving much smoother," she says. "And we should really pay attention to taking curves and turns slowly so they don't lose their footing."

AARP NEWSLETTERS
Get the Your Health newsletter from AARP
Sign up for the latest health news, fitness and nutrition updates and more!
Subscribe
See All Newsletters
Privacy Policy

*Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.*