

Dogs, Cats, and Automobiles

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People are on the go, and increasingly, they are taking their pets along for the ride. While some pets seem born to ride, for others the loud noises and strange motions involved in traveling can be a real problem.

Dr. Kelly Ballantyne, a veterinarian at the University of Illinois Chicago Center for Veterinary Medicine, advises owners on issues related to animal behavior. She offers these tips on how to make traveling a safe and pleasant experience for your pets.

"The first step is to watch for signs that your pet is stressed," advises Dr. Ballantyne.

That is easier said than done, because not all animals express distress in the same ways. Some animals that are very anxious show obvious signs, such as pacing and vocalizing, whereas other, equally stressed pets may give much more subtle indications.

"For dogs, you should watch for excessive salivation, panting, a furrowed brow, holding their ears back, and frequent lip-licking or yawning," says Dr. Ballantyne.

"Cats may crouch or try to hide when stressed," she says. "They may also twitch their tails and pull their ears back. These all can be signs that your pet is anxious and not enjoying the trip."

Your veterinarian will be an important partner in finding a way to manage your pet's anxiety while traveling. There are many options, and you may need to try several approaches to discover what works best for your pet. Dr. Ballantyne recommends experimenting with different approaches when taking your pet on short trips so you can find out what works before taking your pet on a long road trip.

One option available for both dogs and cats is a synthetic equivalent of a natural pheromone with stress-relieving qualities. Feliway® is a pheromone product for cats that comes as a spray or in a diffuser. A similar product for dogs is a DAP (dog appeasement pheromone) collar or spray.

For dogs, specially made clothing that applies gentle, constant pressure on the torso is marketed to produce a soothing effect on stressed dogs. Lavender aroma therapy has also been found to help calm anxious dogs.

For some pets, prescription anti-anxiety medications or sedatives may be the best alternative.

In addition to addressing your pet's stress level, you should ensure that your pet will be safe while traveling, according to Dr. Ballantyne.

"Cats should always be in a carrier," she says. "You can't predict how your pet will react while traveling. A carrier will keep her safe and ensure that she can't accidentally get away from you."

Dogs should also be secured in a carrier or harness when riding in a car. Special harnesses and seats that attach to seat belts are marketed to ensure safe car travel for your dog. If your car has airbags, your dogs should not be placed in the front seat, just as small children should never ride in front.

Nausea is another problem that plagues pets that travel. In dogs, drooling and looking sick to their stomach are likely signs of carsickness. Owners of pets prone to carsickness wonder whether or not to feed their pet.

"It probably isn't a good idea to feed your pet a large meal before a trip, especially before a plane flight," says Dr. Ballantyne. "When going on a long car trip, try feeding small meals during rest stops and feed the biggest meal at the end of the day. If your pet has been carsick on a trip before, talk with your veterinarian about anti-nausea medicine."

Your veterinarian can also advise you on how to handle a long trip if your pet has a special medical condition that requires controlled feeding times, such as diabetes or inflammatory bowel disease.

A final piece of advice from Dr. Ballantyne is for people on the go who are getting a puppy or kitten: "Start when your pet is young. Let him get used to traveling and learn that it is a positive experience."

So get going, and bring your pet with you! Just be sure to work with your veterinarian to find safe and low-stress strategies that will make the experience enjoyable for you and your pet. Happy travels!

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