



Carsick Puppies

Canine Behavior Series

Lots of puppies get carsick in moving cars, but fewer adult dogs. It's likely the immature ear structures of puppies contribute to motion sickness. Human children have this problem, too.

Many puppies take a lot of car rides to places such as dog parks and doggie day care programs. Every trip carries the risk that something will happen to traumatize the puppy about riding in the car. When the dog is getting carsick on each trip, you may get a conditioned effect of nausea associated with the car. Either trauma or conditioning can cause carsickness to continue after the physical reasons for the nausea have been outgrown.

We need our dogs to be able to ride comfortably in cars, and no one enjoys cleaning vomit. If you have a carsick puppy, let's look at ways to minimize stress and mess, both now and when the pup is older.

Precautions

Start with a careful physical evaluation by your veterinarian so you can make the dog as comfortable as possible. Particular areas to look at are ear and orthopedic issues (hip dysplasia, osteochondritis, panosteitis, injured knee ligaments, etc.).

Dogs hide their pain, and growth itself can hurt! So even if no specific physical problem is found, don't rule it out. Keep watching your dog carefully for symptoms, and take precautions that will help if your dog does have something going on physically.

To reduce orthopedic pain or fear of pain that your dog might have, fix every surface in the car on which your dog will rest or move so that it is non-slip under the dog's feet. Rubber-backed throw rugs are one good way to do this—washable ones. Secure the dog whenever the car is moving so the dog doesn't get thrown around.

You can reduce nauseating sensations from immature ears by opening windows two or three inches to equalize the air pressure inside a moving car with the outdoor air pressure. Keep the air inside the car cool.

You can help the dog's eyes override the sickening signals from the ears by positioning the dog to be able to see forward in the direction the car is going. A dog car restraint in the front passenger seat will do this. Putting a dog in the front seat of a car with air bags is a risk you need to be aware of, though. The safest place for a dog in a car is a crate.

Your veterinarian may be able to help you determine the best way to handle positioning your dog in the car. It depends on your vehicle, the nature of the trips, the size of the dog, and possibly other factors. What you might be able to do is use the front seat restraint method just until the dog is solidly past the carsickness problem. Then you could switch to a crate or a dog seat belt in the back seat.

Looking out the side or back windows of the car will make motion sickness worse for some dogs. Restraining the puppy in the car will also help prevent the habit some dogs develop of leaping around and interfering with safe driving.

Steps to Improve Conditioning to Car Rides

If your dog already has a problem, change the car-riding experiences right away. In the process, you will change what the dog expects from riding in cars, take away fear, and clear the way for the dog to outgrow the problem.

1. Reduce the car trips for now. Sometimes we make a problem worse by trying too hard to solve it, and taking a carsick puppy on trip after trip that triggers the physical symptoms is one example. A week or two of no car trips can help get your re-conditioning program off to a good start.
2. If you have the option of using a different vehicle for car trips for awhile, that could reduce your dog's concerns about your regular vehicle.
3. Talk to your veterinarian about medication for car trips. This will only be needed temporarily in the great majority of cases. Reducing the car trips will also reduce the times the dog gets the medication. Ask your veterinarian if ginger or gingersnap cookies would be safe for your dog—and how much is okay to give. Some people feel this helps nausea in their dogs.

4. Avoid car trips that lead to places the puppy doesn't like. If you need to take your puppy to the veterinarian and you haven't yet conditioned your puppy to love going there, get started on that! Find a way to include something positive in every trip.

5. While doing positive activities with the car (see ideas below), build the car exposure gradually. You can break it down as much as necessary, using these stages. Keep it at a level that allows the dog to stay relaxed and not worry about the car.

Start at a distance from the car and gradually, over multiple sessions, move the fun closer. Eventually move it into the car, but don't rush that.

Move away from the car for the interactive activities with the dog again, and have someone start the car. Over multiple sessions, move the activities back inside the car. At first have the car already running by the time you and the puppy get in, and then work up to having the puppy in the car when it is started.

If you don't have a helper, you may be able to tether the dog (in your sight in a safe place and safe manner!) and move back and forth to the car to start it yourself. Remember the constant objective is to keep the dog from getting upset in the least.

When the puppy is comfortable in the car with it being started and all the doors shut (remember to keep it cool), move the car a few feet. Over a series of sessions, move the car a little more and a little more. Keep up the pleasant activities. If possible, have someone else drive while you work with the puppy. Or you drive after having shown your helper how to properly work with the puppy. If you don't have a helper, stop the car each time you play with the puppy—someplace where you can pull out of traffic and stop safely.

Pick straight, smooth routes. Twisty roads, bumpy roads, dusty roads, or doing donuts in a parking lot would be counterproductive to the goal! Going up and down hills can contribute to carsickness, too.

This may sound like a lot of work, but it's pleasant and goes quickly. It's much more enjoyable than cleaning up after a vomiting dog.

6. Observe what works best for your dog as far as meals before a car ride. Some may do better on an empty stomach, but since dogs need water, that may not actually be feasible.

A heavy meal is obviously not a good thing for controlling nausea. You may find that light feeding or perhaps having been fed a couple of hours or so ago works well. If you use food in this conditioning, then of course your puppy will not have an empty stomach. You certainly don't want to stuff the dog, though. Keep treats tiny and do not use hard-to-digest foods. The safest treats are pieces of the dog's regular food.

Positive Conditioning Activities

1. Use mealtimes to improve how your dog feels about the car. Feed multiple small meals a day instead of one large one. This gives you more opportunities to use food for emotional benefits, and also keeps the dog from being stuffed at any time. By feeding all the meals during your progressive conditioning steps, the sessions fit smoothly into your daily schedule. Even feeding one of the meals a day this way will keep the process moving forward.

2. Gradually start including your normal preparations for a car trip in these fun sessions. That will help your puppy learn to associate these preparations with good things instead of nausea. It also gives you the chance to shape your puppy's behavior for controlled happiness rather than leaping all over the place. Give the treats, praise and other rewards when the dog's behavior is exactly what you are looking for.

3. Play games with your dog along with the distance steps, the car-starting, and moving the car. We don't want wild behavior in a car, so these games need to be controlled.

One possible game would be to have the dog get into the car and sit for a treat, stay until you give permission, and then hop back out of the car. Use a ramp if the pup or dog is too small for this to be a completely safe jump. Or just set the dog on the seat, give the treat for sitting, have the dog stay, and give the dog a cue to take position for you to lift the dog back out.

Another game can be played with three small upside down lightweight cups. Put a treat under one and let the dog find and eat it. Do it perhaps three times so the dog has fun but doesn't get tired of the game or overexcited by it. This type of scent game is more appropriate than having the dog search the car for a treat or toy, because that would be dangerous when driving.

4. Give the dog chew items in the car that are not available all the time. This can develop later into a habit for the dog to flop down in a crate and chew to fall asleep.
5. Train your pup on the basics—sit, down, stay, come, walk on a loose leash—and use them all around and inside the car. Keep it calm and pleasant, because that behavior works best in a car and is your goal.
6. You might want to give your dog a massage near or inside the car. Even scratching behind the ears is good—whatever your dog likes that will fit into the situation.
7. Give treats and games and fun things before and during the car sessions, but stop the fun when you arrive home. Make this a neutral time. You don't want the dog to think the end of the trip is the good part. Let that just be a quiet, relaxed opportunity for the dog to think about the nice time you just had together. A little later you can do something else fun.
8. Aim for fun destinations as much as possible when you get to the point of taking the dog for rides again. Fun at the destination is reward during the ride/trip, so it doesn't make the dog think getting the ride over and getting back home is the goal.

A trip through the fast food drive-up window is dog-pleasing as well as being a good puppy social experience. If the pup likes walks, you could drive even a short distance, get out and go for a little walk on leash, and then back home. This is also a great way to arrange the daily socialization outings a pup needs once immunization is complete (ask your veterinarian for that timing). Virtually every outing can be fun for your pup with your good work.

Puppy-To-Go

Dogs who are not disabled by fears of car rides, new places, new people, etc. can find going out with you to be one of the greatest pleasures in life. A good training class will get your dog looking at you with starry eyes, as the amazing person who is able to lead this expedition!

Developing your puppy's enjoyment of car rides is time well spent. It opens so many doors to training, trust, bonding, and a high-quality life.

Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book [Therapy Dogs: Training Your Dog to Reach Others](#). Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian. Veterinarians not specializing in behavior can eliminate medical causes of behavior problems. If no medical cause is found, your veterinarian can refer you to a colleague who specializes in behavior or a local behaviorist.

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