

Carsickness in Dogs and Puppies

By Jill Kessler Miller

Carsickness in puppies is a common occurrence. Like small children, it is often related to the continuing development of a still-immature inner ear. Thankfully, puppies usually outgrow it by the age of six months. Of course, you want a dog that happily goes in the car, so that your adventures together are not limited to within walking distances only. But rather than expect it to “just happen,” put a little work into making sure your canine pal is happy and relaxed in a moving vehicle.

Because carsickness can easily become an automatic response upon getting into the car, you’ll want to limit your dog becoming sick as much as possible. A dog who has vomited in a car a few times immediately associates the car with being sick. I once knew a dog that would start to tremble, drool and heave just standing near a car! Try to avoid this at all costs, as it is much harder to undo later.

Everyone notices once the dog vomits in the car—but there are several signs that the dog is ill before the actual retching. Watch for:

- constant yawning
- excessive drooling
- non-stop whining
- general uneasiness
- inability to settle down
- not moving at all

Destination is very important while learning to ride in the car. Take car trips that are not only to the vet. Go down the block and walk home. Later that day, walk back to the car and drive home.

Drive around the block. The key here is to get in and out of car multiple times without the puppy getting sick.

With these small trips you are building the habit of not vomiting in the car. Drive to a local park, take a walk, drive home. Drive to a coffee place, sit outside and have a cup, drive home. As much as possible, make the destination fun and worth the initial uneasiness. Over time you actually change the pup's emotional response to getting in and riding in the car from one of dread to excited anticipation!

Dogs that are sensitive or slightly anxious often have a harder time with car travel. Excess acid in the stomach causes drooling and nausea. If you have a

dog that is having a hard time acclimating to car travel, here are some tactics to try:

Move pup closer to you: Being relegated to the back of a vehicle can be too far away for some

young dogs. Try putting a crate on the back seat behind you on the passenger side; I say passenger side because, like a baby or toddler, for safety you want to get your dog in and out on the sidewalk, not street, side. Sometimes you have to move the dog around to see where they are the most comfortable (i.e., not becoming ill). Some like to see out, some like to be blocked in, and some small dogs like to ride in the wheel well (area where feet go on the passenger side)! Be careful during the summer though, the bottom of the car can get quite hot. And again, make sure cool air is directly on them wherever they are in the vehicle.

Use a crate instead of allowing your dog to ride loose: Dogs often feel safer in a crate; when they are not being jostled around they can relax. I prefer the metal fold-down kind, as they are stronger in a fender-bender and allow for better air circulation. There are a few crash and safety tested crates as well.

Too much to see: If objects going by excite or worry your dog, drape a towel or sheet over the crate to obscure visual stimulation.

Heat can be a contributing factor to nausea: Make sure there is enough cool air where they are riding. I see dogs in back of small SUVs and station wagons, in the direct sun of the rear window, panting heavily. From having examined many vehicles, I know there is no direct rear air. Even if you're comfortable, the back is often hot and stifled, and sometimes humid from their panting. Use the air conditioning for your dog to keep them cool and dry. If you don't have a vent in the back,

then consider rigging up a hose to carry cool air directly to your dog. An example can be seen here:

[InTheCompanyOfDogs](#)

If you have a pup that has already gotten carsick several times and is now drooling and resistant when even approaching the car, you need to back waaaaaay up, and start over. Follow these steps:

- Open all the car doors. Feed two or three times a day in the car, meals and/or super-special treats. In, eat, out. Make it delicious to get in the car!
- After you've gotten in and out of car with out it moving for a few days, get in, close the doors, have a few treats, get out. Do this a few times a day for a few days. What you want to see is your dog getting in enthusiastically.

- That's going well? Good! Next step: Start the engine. Treat. Turn it off. Get out and go back inside the house. You know the rest—do a few times a day for a few days.
- Now we're at the point of the car actually moving. Get in, start engine, drive several feet (for instance, down a driveway or pull up the block a few hundred feet), stop and park the car. Get out and walk home.
- Later the same day, walk to the car and repeat in reverse.
- Each day, see if you can get a little bit further without the dog drooling or vomiting. Work up to a block away.
- Because the destination is a large factor of whether or not your dog is anxious, it's time to start going to fun places—a nearby park for a walk, the strip mall to pick up your dry cleaning and walk around, a friend's house, a local cafe and sit outside. Have some fun and go home. Do this everyday.

Once you can drive about twenty minutes without your dog becoming anxious or ill, you're done!

Some other tips:

- Many dogs travel better on an empty stomach. Try not feeding (or only feeding a half-ration) for at least 2 hours (or more) before a car trip.
- On the other hand, some dogs do better with a little starchy food in their stomach to absorb acid. I recommend using good old-fashioned Milkbone biscuits, which are grain-based, bland and easy to carry or store.
- Many people have had good results giving Ginger Snap cookies; make sure there's real ginger being used in the recipe, as ginger is known for helping with nausea.
- **DO NOT WITHHOLD WATER PRIOR TO TRAVEL.** Dogs cool and express stress via panting; panting leads to dehydration; dogs need to drink water as needed!
- If you have an emotionally sensitive dog, try having someone the dog trusts ride in the back seat with the dog. They don't need to necessarily console the dog, but be a calm, happy presence. Sometimes just feeling supported by a person's presence will do the trick, sometimes talking to them and pointing out the scenery can help distract and soothe.

- If you'd like to try aromatherapy, put a few drops of lavender oil on a cotton ball and tuck close by, or any other essential oil blend for stress relief. A good one is: [SniffItCollarDiffuser](#)
- One trick I haven't personally tried but is recommended by Dr. Becker of Healthy Pets website is to put the dog in a plastic e-collar (you know, the kind your dog wears after surgery). The limitation of the dog's peripheral vision seems to alleviate motion sickness.

Lastly, if you have a dog that just can't overcome being ill, there are medications that can be prescribed by your veterinarian. Cerenia is a medication that is used specifically for nausea and carsickness, and has high marks for efficacy and safety. Discuss the issue with pet's doctor, and see if there is a medication that is appropriate for your dog.