

Motion Sickness in Dogs

By Tammy Hunter, DVM; Ernest Ward, DVM

My dog gets sick when we travel. What causes this?

Motion sickness in dogs is a common problem. Motion or car sickness is more common in younger dogs than adults. The reason may be due to the fact that the parts of the inner ear involved in balance are not fully developed. Puppies will often “outgrow” motion sickness by the time they are about 1 year old.

Many adult dogs become anxious or even nauseous during travel due to a lack of conditioning and the overwhelming unusual stimuli associated with moving inside a vehicle. Dogs that travel only once or twice a year (typically when visiting the veterinarian) are not used to car rides and often associate the car ride with the stressful experience that follows.

This causes heightened anxiety and stress, and may result in vomiting and diarrhea. Puppies that experience traumatic or frightening first rides may also associate future travel with that stressful event. Some dogs may have medical conditions such as middle or inner ear infections or vestibular disease (disease of the vestibular apparatus, located in the inner ear) that predispose them to nausea. Others may be taking medications that can cause vomiting or diarrhea.

Helping your dog overcome the stress and anxiety of travel will mean that your pet can accompany you on trips more frequently and will allow you to spend more time together.

How can I tell if my dog is getting motion sickness?

Nauseous humans often “turn green” or pale when they feel an upset stomach approaching. Signs your dog may be experiencing motion sickness include:

- whining and pacing
- excessive drooling
- smacking or licking lips
- lethargy or inactivity
- vomiting
- diarrhea

If you think your dog is going to vomit, stopping the car and taking him for a walk may help temporarily relieve his stress.

How can I prevent motion sickness in my dog?

Desensitizing or counter-conditioning your dog to car travel may take some work, but it can be accomplished. Helping your dog overcome the stress and anxiety of travel will mean that he can accompany you on trips more frequently and will allow you to spend more time together.

The best way to ease your dog’s travel anxiety is by taking several short trips before embarking on a long haul. Start by simply placing your dog in your car, starting the

motor, and sitting there without moving for a few minutes. The next day, repeat this process, but back out of your driveway and then return. Be sure to praise your dog and offer a food reward for good behavior. Next, try a trip around the block. Gradually work your way up to riding comfortably for 20 to 30 minutes.

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Conditioning your dog to ride comfortably in the car may require several days or even weeks. Be sure to gradually expose your nervous pet to more and more challenging stimuli. You cannot force your dog to "get over" or "deal with" his anxiety. Traveling in a confined space in a motor vehicle can be frightening for a dog and requires time to adjust. Make sure you maintain a calm and cool attitude, and do not scold your dog if he begins to howl or whine. Visible anxiety is a sign to stop the current training and start again another day. Continuing to expose your dog to a stressful situation will only cause him to further associate the car with displeasure and fear and cause setbacks in your training. Car rides in a carrier can also be good practice for traveling in an airplane or train.

Here are additional tips to make your dog's travel more enjoyable and reduce motion sickness:

Withhold food 12 hours before travel. An empty stomach will help reduce nausea and the need for frequent potty breaks that are often unwelcome, especially during long car rides or airplane or train travel. Be sure to provide access to fresh water whenever possible. Water bottles that hang on the carrier's door are a good option for many pets.

Use a carrier or dog safety harness. Anxious dogs can both hurt themselves and cause accidents. A carrier can often be viewed as a "safe place" for many dogs, however, try to face the carrier in the center back seat with the open door facing the road ahead. Seeing the horizon while traveling helps balance the dog's motion sickness.

Keep the car cool and quiet. Play soft classical music and keep the temperature cool.

Include the sweet smell of home. Add a t-shirt or blanket with your scent to your dog's carrier. In addition to smelling like home, nothing is cozier than mom or dad's shirt.

Offer special trip toys. Giving your dog new toys that he only gets to play with when he travels can help him associate travel with fun.

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If your dog seems to need a little more help to stay calm during travel, talk to your veterinarian about using one of the following remedies:

Lavender or dog pheromone (Adaptil®). Aromatherapy and pheromones can calm a tense traveler. Add these scents to your dog's bedding to help calm his fears.

Calming herbs. Natural remedies, including Bach® flower (Rescue Remedy®), kava, valerian, passionflower, ginger, and skullcap, have been used for decades to ease anxiety and motion sickness.

Anti-nausea medications. Cerenia® (a veterinary-specific prescription medication) and dimenhydrinate (brand names: Dramamine® or Gravol®), and meclizine (brand names: Antivert® and Bonine®). These anti-nausea medications can prevent vomiting in a stressed pet. A single dose of Cerenia® lasts 24 hours. Keep in mind that these drugs only help with motion sickness, not anxiety. Speak to the veterinarian to discuss if these medications are appropriate for your dog and to obtain the correct dosages and frequency of administration.

Anti-anxiety medication. These medications may be considered for use in extremely stressed pets only. Alprazolam (Xanax®), trazodone (Desyrel®) or other prescription medications given the night before travel and repeated 12 hours later can relax even the most anxious pet traveler. Many veterinarians will recommend you give a second dose about 2 hours before you embark on your trip. Keep in mind that some prescription medications need to be started several days to a couple of weeks before travel to be most effective. Always follow instructions from your veterinarian carefully.