Canine Car Sickness

Does your dog get car sick when you take him for a ride in the car?

Most puppies gradually grow out of it, but there are things that can be done to help alleviate that process. Most of the time, car sickness is not caused by the motion of the vehicle, but it is caused by anxiety or fear. That is why it is important to understand that they have no control over it. For most puppies, the first time they are in a moving vehicle is when you bring them home. For adult dogs, they may have had few experiences in a car. Many adult dogs have learned that going for a car ride is often followed by something unpleasant, like going to a veterinarian’s office.

To help your companion’s anxiety, here are some steps that you can take:

1. First, see if your dog will approach the car willingly or exhibits signs of anxiety such as licking his lips, yawning, panting, faltering or trying to pull back on the leash. If your dog shows signs of fear while approaching the car, give a few treats while being close to the car or feed them their dinner near the car. Repeat this over several sessions until your dog will go into the car willingly. Then, get your dog used to being in the car without turning it on or driving. Offer their dinner, a favorite chew toy or bone to make it rewarding. Repeat this several times until they’re comfortable before moving onto the next step.

2. While in the car, start giving your dog a few treats or put his food bowl down so he can start eating. Start the car. Leave it on for just a minute and turn it off. Repeat this several times, calmly praising your dog when he shows calm responses. If he seems fearful, end the session as soon as you can and next time shorten the session and stop before he becomes anxious. Take your time and make sure he is relaxed before ending the session and work up to having the car running for longer periods of time.

3. Once he is used to the car running without any fearful reactions, give your dog a favorite treat or his dinner, then back the car to the end of the driveway or a short distance on the street. Praise him and make sure he can continue eating. Repetition is the key to success. The more you do this, the faster your dog will learn that the car will become a great place for attention, praise and food.

4. Once your dog seems relaxed, take a short trip around the block. It will be handy to have someone else in the car at this point to feed him treats and praise while doing this. Gradually increase the distance traveled until your dog is calm no matter how long he’s in the car. Travel to places that are fun for your dog, not just to the vet or groomer! Go to a dog park, the beach, a friend’s house for a "play date" with their dog.

If motion bothers your dog, try to imagine balancing a full cup of coffee on your dashboard; if you turn sharply, slow or accelerate suddenly or hit a bump, your coffee can spill. Those same sudden movements are the same ones that make your dog feel ill, so adjust your driving technique accordingly. If your dog begins to salivate, is licking his lips a lot or acts distressed, have his leash handy! Pull over and let him get his feet on solid ground and get some fresh air for a few minutes.
Some dogs do suffer from true motion sickness. These dogs feel better when they can't see out, such as riding in an enclosed crate. Crates are much easier to clean up than your car’s upholstery! Others feel better looking out the window. In either case, keep the car cool and well-ventilated.

Unless you are systematically working on getting the dog over his fear of the car as described above, do not feed the dog right before a car ride. Travel prepared; pack cleaning supplies & paper towels. Cover the car seat and floor with a sheet or towel. Do not scold your dog or make a scene if they vomit, as it will only increase his anxiety.

You may want to talk to your veterinarian for advice about possible medications to help settle your pup’s tummy. You can also contact our Behavior Department on how to use Dog Appeasing Pheromones (DAP), Anxiety Wraps or a Calming Cap on your dog to help ease their anxiety while in the car.

**Another travel tip:**
Make sure your pet has an ID tag that is current and has your number where you can reached, even while traveling. The Wisconsin Humane Society can custom engrave an I.D. tag for you right inside our store!

If you would like to work with a Wisconsin Humane Society behaviorist one-on-one regarding this behavior topic, please call 414-431-6173 to schedule a consultation.