

My dog loves to ride in the car so I take him wherever I can. Do I need to use a doggie seatbelt for him?

Yes, for several reasons. One deals with the safety of your dog in case you need to brake suddenly or are in an accident. The second is the danger to you and others if you drive with a dog loose in your car. Several states already have legislation that fines drivers who have unrestrained dogs in their cars.

As for your dog's safety, no matter how well behaved, you should use some type of restraint. Just as you would never drive with a small child who is not in her age and size-appropriate car or booster seat, dogs also need protection. A 50 pound dog becomes a projectile with 1,500 pounds of force in a 35 mph collision. Serious injuries or death on impact are inevitable. Additionally, if the dog is not injured in the crash but is exits the car, he could be frightened and run off, getting hit or lost. A dog that is restrained when first responders reach the car will also make it easier and safer for them to get the dog and other passengers to safety.

The second big reason to use pet restraints in cars is driver distraction. A recent survey conducted by the American Automobile Association questioned 1,000 dog owners who travel with their dogs. Only 16% of those dog owners drive with their pet restrained. According to the AAA, if you look away from the road for 2 seconds your risk of a crash doubles. Those surveyed admitted to engaging in many distracting activities that could take their eyes off the road for 2 seconds or more. These include, petting and playing with their dog, giving him treats, using their hands to keep the dog in the back seat and, believe or not, taking a photo of their dog. Using pet restraint systems will reduce many of these dangerous distracting activities.

There are several options for safely restraining your dog in the car. A dog car safety harness around the dog's chest connects to the seatbelt. Do not try to attach a regular walking harness to the seatbelt. There are actually crash tests that have been conducted to test the effectiveness of car safety harnesses. Small dogs can be strapped into a specially designed booster seat that also attaches to the seat belt mechanism. Be sure to buckle your dog in the back seat to avoid injury if front airbags are deployed. A period of time should be allowed to accustom your dog to the harness or booster seat in the house before using it in the car. A hard plastic airline approved crate is another option if it is stabilized to avoid sliding off the seat or in the cargo area. Mesh barriers keep a dog from getting to the front seat and distracting you, but they don't offer protection for the dog.

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