



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Dogs and Cars

It is not unusual for dogs to have behavior problems related to the car. The most common ones are fear of riding, car-sickness, and unruly, hyperactive, or territorial behavior.

If your dog is either fearful of car rides or gets car-sick, you must show her that there is nothing to be afraid of and no reason to be sick. Many dogs associate car rides with going to the vet (or somewhere unpleasant) or with previously being carsick. Reintroduce the car to the dog slowly and in a non-stressful way.

Start by just sitting in the car with the dog. Don't go anywhere. Don't even start the engine. Just sit in there and read a book or listen to the radio. Soon, the dog will realize that nothing terrible has happened and that she has not gotten sick. Keep doing this until the dog is clearly relaxed and not fearful. If the dog does get sick, then you've stayed too long in the car and you should start over with shorter periods. When you see that the dog is comfortable with this activity, progress a little further by starting the engine. When the dog is relaxed with the engine on, then take a very short trip, perhaps just around the block.

As the dog becomes more and more comfortable, go for longer rides. Drive to places where the dog has fun. Take a short ride up the block to the dog's favorite walking area or to the beach or a friend's house. Let the dog associate car rides with fun, pleasant, and rewarding events. Make sure not to rush the dog into anything, or you may find you've taken two steps back for one step forward. Some dogs associate the car with such good times that they become overexcited. In this case, begin taking the dog for short rides that don't end up at the beach but back at home again.

You should also teach the dog to obey commands in the car. Sit in the car with the dog and teach her to sit and down-stay. Give her lots of practice when you can give her your undivided attention, before you drive anywhere. Then practice on quiet streets. Make sure the dog can and will obey *before* giving a command in rush-hour traffic.

Now when the dog goes bonkers, tell her to down-stay until the distraction passes or you arrive at your destination. There is no reason for a dog to have bad manners in the car. Even a dog who knows these commands in the house or at the park needs to be taught them all over again in the car.

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.