

Traveling With Your Pet

How Can I Make the Travel Experience Better for My Pet?

Our pets share so much of our lives that many of us don't want to consider traveling without them. Whether you are flying, driving a car, or RVing, sharing a trip with a pet can add richness to the experience. Proper planning can make the travel experience better and less stressful for you and for your pet.

Preparing Your Dog For Car Travel

Most dogs can be trained to become good car travelers. If your dog is nervous about car travel, they may have been introduced to it in the wrong way early in their life. If they were thrust into a noisy machine and taken for a long, jarring ride only to be greeted by a veterinarian with a needle, it's no wonder they hide when they hear car keys. To avoid such disasters, introduce your dog to car travel gradually. Start by placing your dog in a parked car, and then teach him or her to get in and out of the car. The safest way for your dog to travel in a vehicle is inside their crate. Next, start the engine to get them used to the noise and vibrations. Then, take them on short rides. Watch your dog for symptoms of motion sickness (panting, vomiting, excess salivation). Ask your veterinarian about medications that can help with motion sickness if it continues to be a problem. As you take your dog on longer rides, be sure to practice safety habits. Many dogs love to stick their head out of an open car window but there are many reasons this is not safe. They could jump or fall out of the vehicle. They could also get dirt or other debris in their eyes or nose. One of the biggest safety hazards for your dog is if they are left in a parked car when the outside temperature is too hot or too cold. In warm weather, temperatures inside a parked car can reach 120 degrees in a matter of minutes which can lead to hyperthermia and death. In cold weather, your pet could be at risk for hypothermia.

Car Travel Basics

- Get your pet used to car travel before taking them on long trips
- For long trips, bring enough of your pet's regular food and medication for the duration
- Make a plan should your pet need veterinary care during the trip
- Don't leave your pet in a parked vehicle if the weather is too hot or too cold

What Food and Medications Should I Bring When Traveling With My Pet?

There are many factors you can't control when you are on the road, but changing your pet's food can cause vomiting, diarrhea, or other problems that can be difficult to deal with while traveling. Try to bring enough of your pet's regular food for the duration of the trip, and try to maintain the feeding and toilet schedule your pet is used to at home. If your pet receives medication, bring enough for the trip and try to maintain your regular schedule.

If you are traveling by car or RV, bringing your pet's favorite bed, blanket, or toys can also help make the trip more relaxing and pleasant for your best friend. If you are flying, you will need an airline-approved carrier for your pet; you should also request that your pet fly in a temperature-controlled cargo area.

Many people escape the snow by traveling with their pet to warmer climates. Although fleas and ticks may not be a problem during the winter where you live, your pet may be exposed to these parasites at your destination. Make sure you're prepared by asking your veterinarian for appropriate flea and tick control products.

How Should I Plan for Travel With My Pet?

Spontaneity and family emergencies aside, most of us wouldn't take a trip without planning some things ahead of time. The same thing applies when traveling with your pet:

Where to stay: Many hotels and rental properties allow pets. Locating proper accommodations ahead of time and being clear about fees (some places charge an extra fee for pets) can help minimize anxiety when you arrive.

Travel requirements: Most airlines require a health certificate for pets that will be flying. The health certificate generally states that the pet is in good health and free from any infectious or contagious diseases. Don't assume this document can be obtained from your veterinarian on the way to the airport! Your pet may need a physical examination, fecal exam, or other procedures before your veterinarian can sign a health certificate. Also, the certificate must be obtained within a certain window of time before you travel. Find out from your airline what their requirements are and plan to get the health certificate ahead of time.

Some destinations (particularly island locations like England and Hawaii) may have quarantine regulations or rabies certification procedures. Clarify any of these requirements well in advance of your trip.

Medical care: Do you have a plan in case your pet gets sick while you are traveling? If possible, find a veterinarian at your destination; your own veterinarian may be able to make some recommendations. This is particularly important if your pet has an existing medical problem or is on medication.

Should I Sedate My Pet for Travel?

Giving a tranquilizer to a pet before traveling has pros and cons. Some would argue that if your pet is tranquilized, then he or she is not sharing the travel experience with you— so what is the point of bringing your pet along? Sedation can also have side effects, including lowering body temperature (which could be an issue if your pet is flying in the cargo area of a plane), and causing hypotension (low blood pressure). Others may argue that a little light sedation can calm a pet that is overly stressed or excited while traveling and can therefore make the trip more pleasant for everyone involved. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question. Some pets can be conditioned and trained to travel better if you have time to prepare them for a trip so they don't need sedation, but some pets do very well with a light sedative. Remember that sedation does not address all travel issues; if your pet has severe motion sickness or gets extremely stressed while traveling, it may be better to arrange for a pet sitter or board him or her. Also, not every pet is a good candidate for a tranquilizer, so ask your veterinarian if sedation is a good idea for your pet.

If you have never given your pet a tranquilizer before, give a test dose ahead of your trip. Pick a day when you will be home with your pet for most of the day. That way, if the medication causes excessive sedation or other negative side effects, you will be there to intervene and call your veterinarian for help.

What Else Should I Know About Travelling With My Pet?

If you plan to travel with your pet, let your veterinarian know ahead of time. He or she may be able to advise you about parasite protection and other health considerations that may be different at your destination. If you decide to leave your pet at home, your veterinarian can likely recommend a good boarding facility or pet sitting service. Addressing any questions or concerns with your veterinarian ahead of time can save worry and stress while you are away.