

# Car Travel with your Dog

Whether it's part of daily routines, holiday adventures, or trips to the vet, your dog may need to travel in a vehicle from time to time. Ensuring these experiences are **positive and comfortable** helps prevent stress and challenging behaviours in the future – making every journey smoother and more enjoyable for both of you.

## Why it Matters

Some dogs may have had past experiences with car travel that left them feeling either confident or worried. These individual experiences can greatly influence how they respond to future trips, so it's important to **observe and respond to your dog's unique needs**.

Car travel should be introduced gradually, using a **positive and choice-based approach** to help build your dog's confidence and sense of safety.

## Things to Consider

- Ensure your dog is comfortable with the car harness by training them before you start using it in the car.
- If your dog appears worried or resistant when using harness equipment, consult your vet to rule out pain or discomfort.
- Make sure the harness is always secured with a safe restraint system when you are travelling.
- Some breeds are prone to travel sickness, which can negatively affect their experience in the car. Over time, a dog that gets car sick will start to anticipate this before car travel, making the journey more difficult for everyone. Your vet can help address car sickness.
- If you're concerned, you can reach out to our behaviour helpline for tailored advice.

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## Step 1: Understand Your Legal Obligations (NSW)

In accordance with the *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979* and the *Road Rules 2014* (NSW), dogs must be properly restrained when travelling in a vehicle to:

1. ensure safety and
2. prevent driver distraction.



## Step 2: Safety and Comfort

- Use a properly fitted, vehicle-rated harness (ideally one that has undergone crash-testing).
- The harness should attach to a vehicle anchor point or seatbelt, not just to a collar.
- Make sure the harness fits correctly: if it's too loose, the dog may slip out and become a projectile in the vehicle; if it's too tight, it can cause discomfort or injury during sudden stops.
- Allow the dog to sit/stand/lie in a natural and comfortable position in the vehicle.
- Use of a crate or enclosed space in the car (secured to the vehicle) is also fully compliant and often recommended. The crate must be sized so the dog can comfortably stand, turn around completely, and lie down in a natural, relaxed position.

Any crate used during transport must be "secured firmly into your vehicle using straps or a fastened seatbelt.". Detailed guidance on crate training can be found in our Helping Your Dog Love Their Crate handout.

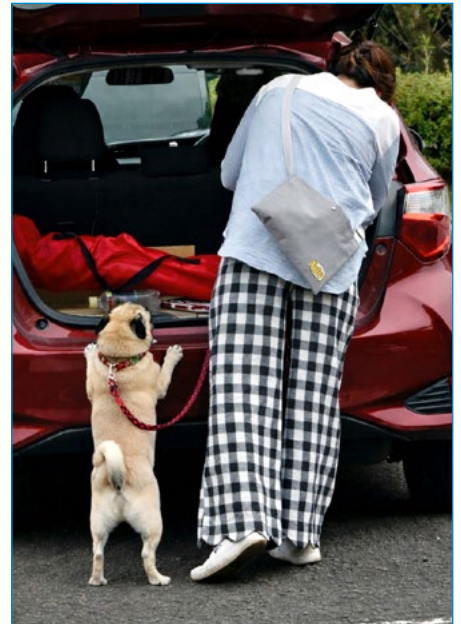
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## Step 3: Preparation for Travel

Get your dog used to your vehicle BEFORE its time to travel.

### Getting started:

- Put your car in a securely fenced or fully enclosed area where your dog can move freely without the risk of your dog running into traffic or encountering other hazards. Let the dog explore inside and outside the car.
- If that isn't possible, use a training lead (10–15 feet) to allow your dog to move freely and explore the vehicle and its surrounding, helping them gather information and build confidence, while still keeping them safe.
- Keep the vehicle doors open.
- Give your dog time to start to relax.
- Allow your dog to explore and approach the vehicle at their own pace. Don't force them to approach the car until they are ready.
- Avoid using food to lure them directly toward the car. Instead, scatter small amounts of food around the vehicle so they can investigate and sniff freely, creating positive associations. This encourages relaxed exploration, helps them process the environment, and reduces anxiety or conflict over access to food.



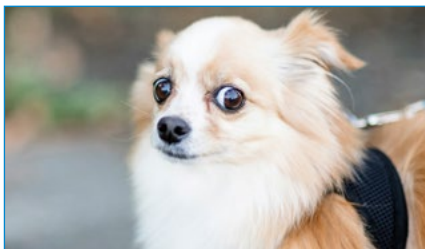
### Other helpful tips:

- Let your dog choose to move toward the vehicle on a long line, without pressure. Add familiar bedding or mats to the car:
- Pheromone products like Adaptil can help create a calm, reassuring environment by mimicking natural comforting pheromones, reducing anxiety during car travel.

## Step 4: Observe the Dog's Behaviour

- Watch how your dog reacts to the car. Are they curious, excited, hesitant, or nervous? Respond with empathy and support if they are worried. Here are some hints to help you figure out how your dog is feeling:

What to Look For	How to Respond
Lowered body, ears back, tucked tail, trembling, stretching out towards to sniff and gather information	→ Allow your dog to move away from the car. Observe their body language before continuing. If they remain fearful, end the session and try again another time.
Vigilance, constant scanning of the environment, darting or erratic movements on lead	→ Ensure your dog has the choice to move freely. Provide a snuffle mat, lick mat, scattered treats, or chew items away from the car. Let your dog explore at their own pace.
Overstimulated (jumping up, mouthing)	→ Create distance from the car. Offer long-lasting chews or scent-based/snuffling activities to help regulate emotions. Resume exposure only once your dog is calm.

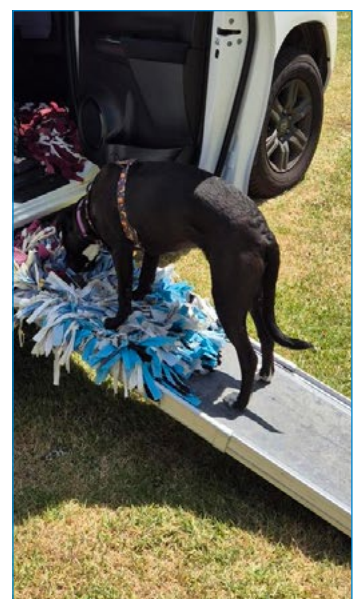


If your dog shows extreme fear, panic, or refuses to approach the car, professional support is available and can make a big difference in helping them feel safe and confident.

Book a virtual consultation with our Veterinary Behaviourist at the RSPCA NSW Sydney Veterinary Hospital: (02) 9770 7575 or email our Behaviour Helpline: [mail@rspcansw.org.au](mailto:mail@rspcansw.org.au)

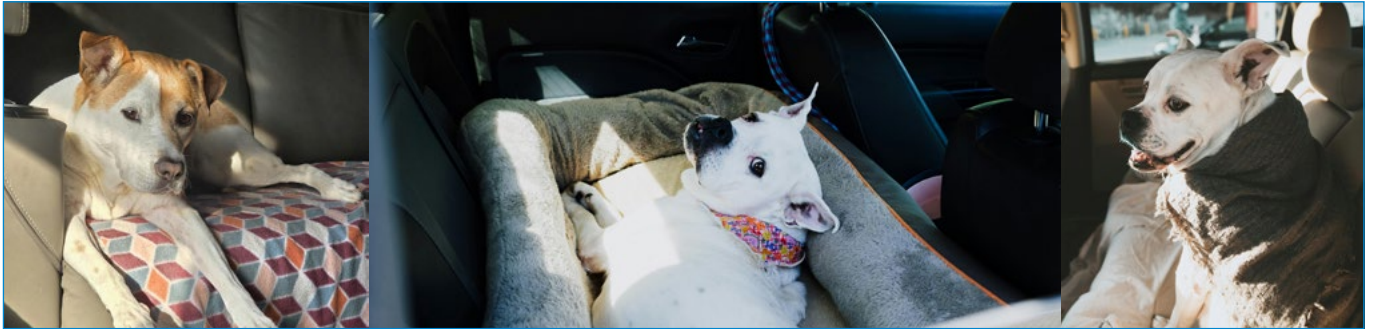
## Step 5: Increasing Positive Feelings

- Sniffing helps dogs to relax. You can encourage your dog to sniff around the car by putting very small pieces of treats around for them to find. Along the way, they will gather information about the car and environment.
- Support every choice to approach the car with treats, **and also reward when they choose to move away**, ensuring all choices lead to positive outcomes. The dog should always have the choice to create distance from the car if they feel worried or unsure.
- Consider your dog's mobility – use ramps or steps to help your dog get in and out of the car. If they are more comfortable when using the car, they are less likely to develop negative feelings about it.
- Use snuffle mats, lick mats, and chew items to create a comforting setup.



## Step 6: Build Relaxation in the Car

- Once your dog chooses to enter the car, support them by offering them the opportunity to lie down and relax with a chew or lick mat. Keep sessions short and always allow them to leave the space freely.
- This process may take several short sessions. The goal is to ensure every interaction is **positive and contributes to stress-free learning**.



## Step 7: Small Steps to Enjoying the Journey

- Once your dog is relaxed in a stationary car, begin introducing short periods with the engine on, then progress to brief drives around the block.
- Some dogs may need visual barriers within the car or covers for some windows (if safe). This can help reduce external distractions and stressors during car travel, making the environment calmer and more secure for your dog.

## You're Not Alone

If you're facing challenges, support is available:

- Contact the RSPCA facility where you adopted your pet to speak with a qualified behaviour consultant.
- Book a virtual consultation with our Veterinary Behaviourist at the RSPCA NSW Sydney Veterinary Hospital: (02) 9770 7575.
- Email our free behaviour helpline: [mail@rspcansw.org.au](mailto:mail@rspcansw.org.au)

