

# Helping Your Dog to Enjoy Car Rides

By Sherry Woodard

Do you have a dog who hates car rides, or who looks ill at even the mention of a ride in the car? Many dogs lack positive associations to car rides because when they do go for a drive, it's to the groomer or veterinarian, outings they may not like.

We can help most dogs feel better about car rides by teaching them to associate the car with good things. Before starting these exercises, open a car window just a little for fresh air. If it's hot out, you may want to work in the evenings or early mornings. You could also try cooling the car before bringing your dog out to it, but don't blast air conditioning on the dog. Remember to praise your dog for all progress she makes.



Here are some steps you can take to help your dog enjoy car rides:

1. Don't feed your dog her daily meal before doing the exercise. Start with a walk out to the car. If your car is in an unfenced driveway, keep her on a loose lead for safety. Open the car door and hand the dog a small piece of food or her favorite toy, which you have retrieved from inside the car. If your dog doesn't want to get into the car, walk back to the house. (If the dog does get into the car, move on to step 2.) Repeat this step one to three times each day for six days.
2. Once you've established a positive association to being near the car, climb into the car holding the dog's lead and hand her some of her food, kibble by kibble, or hold out her favorite toy. Tell her how much fun car rides are, hand her one more piece of food or the toy, and return to the house. If she still seemed reluctant during this step, repeat the process three times daily – and start moving further inside the car so that she is stretching to reach the toy or kibble. If needed, repeat three times each day for six days. Hopefully, when she feels more relaxed, she will surprise you and climb in. You can also up the ante by using a more enticing food treat (like boiled chicken) as you move further into the car.
3. After six days, you should be able to walk out and sit in the car with your dog. If she is still unwilling to climb in, gently pick her up and help her in. Attach a seatbelt to the dog if you plan to use one for rides. Sit next to her, pet her and praise her, and use the toy or food as a reward. Then, teach her a release word, such as "okay," and climb out together (you first) and go for a short walk – another reward. Practice three times in one day.

4. On another day, repeat step 3 but this time have your dog eat her whole meal out in the car. Sit in the car with her next to you and let her eat. After she has finished, release her with an “okay” and take a walk.

5. Dinner out again! This time, put the dog in the car with her food and start the engine. Don’t go anywhere – just start the car. If she is willing to eat with the motor running, let it run. If not, shut it off and let her finish her dinner. Then, release her and take your walk together.

6. If the dog stopped eating with the motor on, try a higher-value food the next day. Repeat the previous day’s activity: give a yummy dinner with the motor running and take a walk afterward. Practice daily or nightly until your dog is relaxed, climbs in and out of the car, and enjoys dinner with the motor running.

7. You have reached the big event: the car ride! Just like every other day, go out together, get in the car and start the motor. Have the dog’s dinner with you, but don’t serve it yet. Attach her seatbelt and give her a toy for the short journey. As you leave the driveway, talk to her and praise her. Drive no more than five minutes and when you get back, serve her dinner in your driveway with the motor still running. Then release her, take a walk together, and tell her how great she is.

From this point on, practice daily, adding drive time each day. If your dog starts to drool or become anxious at any time, stop and take her for a walk to relax her, and then go home. Make the next day’s drive a little shorter or take a route with fewer curves and bumps if you suspect that might make a difference. Start taking her out for walks during your outings and remember to travel together often. You don’t need to serve dinner, but a small treat or playtime are great rewards for stress-free trips. Thank you for working with your dog so that she can enjoy car rides for the rest of her life!

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