Safe car travel for puppies

A trip in the car is a big experience for a puppy. There are unfamiliar sounds, movement, smells and a restraint they may still be getting used to. Some puppies settle quickly. Others need more help.

Start with the part your puppy can manage comfortably. You don't need to fit a full training session and a drive around the block into the first attempt.

Get comfortable before going anywhere

If you are using a travel crate, introduce it at home first. Leave the door open, let your puppy investigate and reward small steps such as approaching or stepping inside. Build up to brief door closures while they remain comfortable.

A puppy who is worried about being confined is unlikely to find a moving car easier. Take the time to practise the crate or harness separately. Our Puppy Setup sessions can help you work through those first steps at home.

Make the first car sessions easy

Begin beside the parked car, or sitting inside with the engine off, depending on your puppy's response. Reward comfortable investigation. Keep the vehicle cool and stay with your puppy throughout.

Once that is easy, introduce one change at a time, such as the engine starting. A very short drive comes later. Watch the puppy rather than working to a fixed timetable. If they become worried, return to an easier step.

When practical, have someone else drive so you can observe and help your puppy. The driver needs to concentrate on the road.

Choose and fit the restraint carefully

Use a suitable vehicle harness or appropriately secured travel crate. Check the manufacturer's fitting instructions and look for credible crash-testing information. A walking harness or a product labelled as a car seat is not automatically suitable for crash protection.

RSPCA Australia notes that there is no formally recognised Australian standard for crash testing dog restraints or carriers. Avoid relying on a vague claim that a product meets "Australian safety standards". Check what testing was actually done.

Watch for nausea as well as fear

Lip licking, heavy drooling, restlessness or vomiting may mean your puppy feels sick. Anxiety and nausea can occur together. A puppy who feels unwell needs help, rather than more pressure to behave.

Speak with your vet if these signs occur, especially before a necessary longer trip. Ask about meal timing, hydration and treatment for your puppy's age and health. Do not give human travel-sickness medicines or assume a calming product will treat the problem.

If your puppy becomes distressed during a journey, stop somewhere safe when you can. Adjust the plan before the next practice.

Plan for the trip your puppy can manage

For necessary journeys, take fresh water, a bowl, lead, poo bags and spare bedding. Allow for safe toilet breaks and have your puppy secured before opening the car door.

Never leave your puppy unattended in the car. Keep the interior comfortable and ventilated. Heat can become dangerous even when the weather does not feel particularly hot.

As your puppy becomes comfortable travelling, include manageable outings to pleasant destinations. Ask your vet about appropriate places to visit while vaccinations are still in progress.

Common questions

Will my puppy grow out of car sickness? Some improve as they mature, but persistent symptoms need veterinary advice. Don’t rely on waiting for it to pass.

Should I keep driving until they get used to it? Repeating an overwhelming journey can make the next trip harder. Practise at a level your puppy can manage and seek help if you cannot find a comfortable starting point.

Can training help? Yes, gradual practice can help build comfort. It does not replace assessment or treatment when your puppy is unwell. Our Puppy Setup sessions and Puppy School can help with the early training foundations.

Sources checked 21 October 2026: RSPCA: carrier training; RSPCA: vehicle restraints; RSPCA: road-trip preparation; VCA veterinary guidance: motion sickness; VCA: travel training.