



# Bucks County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

AN INDEPENDENT NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION  
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## Helping Your Dog Overcome Car Sickness

Written for Bucks County SPCA by Diane Herstine ©2002

### Why do dogs suffer from “car sickness”?

Car sickness can be based on the association between the car and a negative experience i.e. going to the vet for shots or fear of the experience due to no previous positive exposure. There may be obvious or subtle signs that your dog doesn't enjoy riding in the car. Some of these signs include increased panic upon getting in the car, increased salivation, refusal to get in, the animal may not settle once in the car, tensing up in the vicinity of the car, vomiting or defecating, trembles in or near the car, and stops acting happy by tucking his tail between his hind legs.

The ten step program, on the next page, is designed to help you show your dog all the good things about riding in the car. Soon you and your dog will be happily roving around.

### Where do I begin?

Read over the bulleted information then proceed to the step-by-step program on the following page.

- *Hold off on unnecessary car rides.*  
If your dog suffers from heavily salivation, visible shakes or trembles throughout the duration of the ride, hold off on unnecessary car rides until after you have completed this program. Talk to your vet about prescribing a mild sedative to help through those necessary rides to the vet.
- *Begin at the place where your dog doesn't exhibit any reaction to the car.*  
For some dogs, they may jump right in and only begin some of those panicky behaviors once the car is started. For other dogs they might not want to be in the general vicinity of the car. We will start at the point of no reaction to show your dog exactly the reaction we want when we go bye byes. We want him happily anticipating what comes next.
- *Do not proceed at a pace faster than your dog can handle.*  
In order to consider a step completed, the dog must react calm and happy to that step for a short period of time. If your dog does react by trembling, cowering, and drooling, go back to the step where your dog was acting calm and happy, then progress from there.
- *Name this new experience and make it a game.*  
If you had previously been saying, Let's go for a car ride; pick a new word like “time to go on a trip.” Say those new words right before you practice each step.
- *Set aside your dog's meal time to practice this program.*  
Try to make the meal extra special by adding something he wouldn't normally get like a few pieces of hot dogs, cheese, or canned food. Halfway through the program, we will slowly start to remove the food from the program and use it as a reward for happy behavior after riding in the car.
- *Praise you dog after you are done the exercise.*
- *Have other family members practice this program with your dog.*

**Step 1:** Your goal is to show your dog the reaction you want from him. Start at the place where your dog is acting calmly and happy. If your dog begins to react to the car from 3 feet away, start 4 feet away. Bring your dog's meal with you.

Ok, "Time to go on a \_\_\_\_\_."

- Ask your dog to sit and put his dish down.
- While he is eating, tell him a story you know by heart.
- When he is done eating, tell him he is an awesome dog and go inside.
- During this daily exercise, move his dish a couple of inches closer to the reaction line, every other day over the course of 1-2 weeks. Don't rush!

**Step 2:** Your goal is to get up to the car with your dog acting calm and happy. You should now be at the place where your dog's reaction might have started.

Ok, "time to go on a \_\_\_\_\_."

- Repeat the above steps move his dish a couple of inches closer to the car every other day over the course of 1-2 weeks, depending on how the dog is reacting.

**Step 3:** Your goal is to play with the door handle of the car while your dog is acting calm and happy.

- Repeat the above steps, but while your dog is eating play with the handle of the car door for the next 1-2 weeks.

**Step 4:** Your goal is to open the door of the car while your dog remains calm and happy.

- Repeat the above steps, but while your dog is eating open and close the doors of the car, quietly and slowly at first. You can start by standing next to the open door but towards the end of the week sit on the seat with the door open. Practice for 1-2 weeks.

**Step 5:** Your goal is to get your dog's nose inside the car while your dog remains calm and happy.

- Repeat the above steps.
- Gradually over the next 1-2 weeks, inch slowly back so you are sitting entirely on the seat and your dog must stick his head inside the car to eat.

**Step 6:** Your goal is to get your dog at least halfway in the car. For dogs that never do things in halves, if they want to get all the way in, that is fine too.

- Repeat the above steps encouraging your dog to get in the car.
- Spend the next 1-2 weeks varying the doors and the part of the car your dog jumps into. If you only want your dog to sit in one place then concentrate on that spot.

**Step 7:** Your goal is to get your dog in, while you get out and sit in the driver seat.

- Repeat the above steps, but while your dog is eating get out and sit in the driver's seat.
- Spend the next 1-2 weeks perfecting this. Have other family members participate too!

**Step 8:** Your goal is to start the car, but stay in the driveway.

- Repeat the above steps, but while your dog is eating start the car but don't drive yet!
- Spend the next 1-2 weeks practicing.
- Then for 1-2 more weeks, practice gradually increasing the delay of meal until it only comes after the trip is over. We need to do this because presence of food in your dog's stomach may cause him to throw up during the ride.

**Step 9:** Your goal is to start the car and drive up and down the driveway.

- Repeat the above steps, start the car and drive up and down the driveway.
- When you park the car, tell him he is an awesome dog, go inside then give him his meal.
- Practice this for 1-2 weeks

**Step 10:** Your goal is to gradually increase the duration of the ride. Start by keeping the trips short. Work up to longer rides.

- Repeat the above steps and spend the next week on 5-10 minute short trips (drive around the block, go to the gas station).
- Work up to 10-20 minute trips the next week.
- Work up to 20-30 minute trips the next and continue increasing the duration of the trips.

Together you and your pooch can discover some really fun sites around your area or rediscover your neighborhood. Congratulations to everyone and happy motoring!