

A Matter of Life and Death

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We are all devoted to the well being of our dogs. Why then do so many of them ride loose in our cars when it could be a matter of life and death?

A loose dog in a car can cause an accident in any number of ways. It can hinder the driver, block their view, cause them to be distracted, get under the driver's feet or interfere with the movement of the steering wheel. Any dog can become a deadly projectile if the driver has to slam on the brakes suddenly or if an accident should occur. According to "Dog Watch", in a 30-mph crash a 60-pound dog will hit a windshield, back seat, or passenger with a force of 1,200 pounds!

Safety in the event of a collision or emergency is but one good reason to keep a dog restrained in a moving vehicle. In the event of an accident, it is the job of rescue workers to concentrate on the injured human passengers rather than ensuring the health and safety of the canines. Assuming your dog survives an accident, it could easily lose its life or be lost should it escape the vehicle either through an open door, broken window or while rescue workers try to save yours.

Some years ago two friends were traveling to an agility trial in a pick up truck fitted out with a camper shell when they had a blow-out on the freeway, flipped over and landed up side down. The driver and her passenger were both wearing their seat belts and were not badly injured although they were unable to release their seat belts immediately after the accident. They had 4 small dogs loose in the cab however, and had to argue frantically to stop rescue workers from opening the doors of the cab before the dogs were restrained (which is difficult to do when you are upside down and an animal is terrified).

If that wasn't enough, there had been a fifth dog loose in the back of the pick up under the crushed camper shell. Fearing that the gas tank might explode at any time, authorities would not allow either the driver or the passenger to approach the rear of the truck to search for the trapped English Shepherd (who miraculously survived the crash). After dogs and owners had been reunited, the handlers swore they would never travel with dogs loose in their vehicle in the future. The experience had made them believers in restraining their dogs while traveling.

A few years ago, another friend was involved in an accident. Rear-ended at a stoplight, items in the back of the van hit the front window with some force. Luckily the dogs were crated and did not become deadly projectiles in their own right and escaped serious injury. If I was not a believer in restraining my beloved dogs before that incident, I certainly was after.

Another friend recently related to me a personal experience. Her mother was traveling with a beloved terrier in the car when they had an accident. The terrier was thrown from the back seat into the front window and knocked unconscious. Her dogs now travel wearing a seat belt.

Canine seat belts and crates are available just about everywhere. Crates may be either sturdy wire or plastic but should be secured in some safe fashion so that they don't become projectiles as well. I would advise that wire cutters large enough to cut the crate exterior be carried in the vehicle as well. In the event of an accident, access to the door of the crate might be blocked and it is possible that the dog might have to be cut out of the carrier. However, even this would be preferable to having the dog lost or killed outright in the accident itself.

Regarding seat belts, the restraint system should anchor the animal to a fixed point in the vehicle as well as distribute the force of a sudden stop across the strongest part of the dog's body. Some seat belts click into the seat belt device on the floor or seat of your vehicle and will keep the dog secure while allowing them a certain small amount of freedom. Models include adjustable harnesses, some which are even padded. Never connect a seat belt to a dog's collar, as it could be harmful or fatal in a collision

If you love your dog, when you travel I urge you to consider safeguarding it in a crate or with a seat belt in case of a sudden stop or an accident. The risk is just too high to do otherwise.