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# Pets and Distracted Driving

By **Tara Parker-Pope** May 19, 2010 11:36 am

Do you drive with your pet?

Although driving while text messaging or talking on the phone is getting a lot of attention, pets can also be a common source of driver distraction. Exact statistics on pet distraction are difficult to come by — most surveys list unrestrained cats and dogs inside the car as one of many “internal distractions” along with grabbing loose items on the seat or swatting an insect. But nearly 90 percent of pet owners say they travel with their pets. And one survey from Nationwide Mutual Insurance found that 8 percent of drivers admit to driving with a pet on their lap.

The worry isn't just about an unrestrained animal contributing to unsafe driving or an accident. During a crash, a flying dog or cat represents a serious hazard to everyone in the car. The pet advocacy group Bark Buckle UP notes that in a 35-mile-per-hour accident, an unrestrained 60-pound dog would carry the force of a 2,700-pound projectile. Unrestrained dogs and cats can impede rescue workers in more serious accidents, and they also are more likely to be harmed or even thrown from a vehicle in minor fender benders.

Two years ago the California legislature passed a law imposing fines on drivers with unrestrained pets on their laps or in the car, but the legislation was vetoed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who at the time said he was only approving laws that met the state's top priorities. The Virginia legislature also considered such a law, but it didn't pass.

A December report from the Office of Legislative Research notes that Hawaii appears to be the only state that specifically bans a driver from holding a pet on his or her lap. “The Hawaii law prohibits a driver from allowing an animal, person or object to interfere with his or her control of the vehicle,” the report states.

Other states such as Arizona, Connecticut and Maine have broader distracted driving laws that could be used to penalize distracted drivers for riding with a pet in their lap, the report noted.

The Humane Society of the United States notes that dogs don’t have to be locked up in a carrier while in the car to keep them safe. If a dog enjoys the ride, the Humane Society suggests a restraining harness that can be purchased from a pet store. The Web site for Bark Buckle UP lists several products for traveling with your dog, including a mobile pet bed or a dog seat belt. The Humane Society also advises keeping a dog in the back seat because front-seat air bags pose a hazard to even large dogs.

Because cats are typically uncomfortable riding in a car or being restrained, it’s best to keep them in a pet carrier that is also strapped in with a seat belt.

Late last year, CBS News reported on a lost and emaciated Rottweiler named Ella that was found along the highway. The animal had gathered up a mound of personal items — a toothbrush, comb and candle — and had been sleeping with them. An animal rescue worker connected the dots and discovered that the items were debris from a car accident and the animal had been thrown from the vehicle two weeks earlier. Emergency workers who had responded to the crash never saw the dog, and although the family had survived, they believed their dog had died in the accident.

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