



Driving on the Right Side of the Road Distracted Driving - Driving with Pets



DON'T LET YOUR PET DISTRACT YOU

One driving distraction that is often overlooked is our pets. Can a person really pay attention to the road with a 60 pound golden retriever on his or her lap? The answer is **NO**. It is surprising, then, that states generally do not have laws that prohibit this type of behavior. As of December, 2009, Hawaii is the only state that strictly prohibits motorists from driving with a pet on their lap.¹

An American Automobile Association (AAA) study found that 80 percent of drivers take their pets along for car rides, but less than 20 percent restrain them. One out of five drivers admits to letting a dog sit in his or her lap while driving. The same study found that driving with a pet in the car is the third worst driving distraction behind talking on a phone and texting.

Being distracted while driving increases the chances of a crash. If a crash does occur, the pet can be very harmful to the driver. You can imagine how much worse the injuries resulting from a crash would be if instead of just slamming into an airbag, you slam into a large dog. Unfortunately, many people do not give their pet any type of restraint (i.e., seatbelt) when they are driving with their pets. This, of course, is extremely unsafe for your beloved pet as well. You buckle yourself up, so why wouldn't you buckle your pet up too?

Here are some of the ways that having a pet in your car can be distracting:

- If your pet is on your lap, it is harder to see the road.
- A barking dog can be very annoying to a driver.
- A loose pet diverts a driver's attention from the road.
- If an animal is unrestrained in the backseat or pickup truck bed it can decrease visibility out of the back of the vehicle, especially if the animal is jumping around.

RULES OF THE ROAD

As mentioned above, only Hawaii specifically prohibits driving with an animal on your lap. All states, including Texas, have rules against distracted driving or reckless driving. So, if a police officer thinks that your pet is distracting you, you might get pulled over. Also, if your pet is distracting you, you are much more likely to commit an offense such as running a red light, cutting off another vehicle, or being at fault in an accident.

Recently, some states, such as California and Virginia, have begun to discuss laws that would put restrictions on driving with pets. At least eight states – California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington – have laws that require an animal to be secured while riding in the bed of a pickup truck.² Texas, too, may start looking into potential restrictions. It is likely that in the future we will see new laws that specifically address driving with pets.

ON THE SAFE SIDE

If you are going to drive with your pet in the car, it is important to do so correctly and safely. First, you should restrain your pet. If you are involved in an accident while travelling 35 mph, with a 60-pound unrestrained dog, that dog is capable of causing an impact of up to 2,700 pounds.³ That is the equivalent of a one-ton rock falling on top of you. Second, it is also extremely unsafe to drive with your pet unrestrained in the bed of a pickup truck. Any sudden bump or swerve could send your pet flying from the vehicle. Third, letting your pet hang its head out of a window is not only distracting to the driver, but may also block the driver from seeing surrounding traffic.

There are many affordable options for restraining your pet in a vehicle, such as pet seatbelts and crates. See the “More Information” section below for online dealers.

What Other Safety Tips Can You Suggest?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Assessment of the current state of laws as they relate to driving with pets:
<http://www.cga.ct.gov/2009/rpt/2009-R-0458.htm>
- Cartoon showing the dangers of driving with unrestrained pets:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjrdBt0Bkc>
- Retailer website for pet restraints with compelling reasons for using them:
<http://www.canineauto.com/>

¹ Frisman, Paul. *Pets in Cars and Distracted Driving*. December 17, 2009. <http://www.cga.ct.gov/2009/rpt/2009-R-0458.htm>.

² Baker, Meghan. *We're Driven to Distraction When Fido is Co-Pilot, Study Finds*. August 19, 2010. <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/08/19/driven-distraction-pets-car-just-dangerous-texting>.

³ *Bark Buckle Up*. <http://www.barkbuckleup.com/WhyBuckleUp.asp>.