

Dogs unrestrained in cars distract drivers, pose threat

By [Larry Copeland](#), USA TODAY

Dog lovers, beware: Taking man's best friend for a ride could be risky.

Nearly 60% of dog owners have driven while distracted by their pets as passengers, according to a new survey by auto club AAA. Only 17% — about one in six — ever use animal restraints, which can prevent pets from being a distraction and protect them and other occupants in a crash, the survey finds.

In crashes, unrestrained dogs pose an unintended threat to the driver and other passengers, says Jennifer Huebner-Davidson, manager of traffic safety programs at AAA.

She says an unrestrained 10-pound dog in a crash at 50 mph will exert 500 pounds of force on whatever it strikes; an 80-pound dog in a crash at just 30 mph will exert about 2,400 pounds, she says. Unrestrained dogs also can prove distracting by climbing onto the driver's lap, interfering with the ability to steer or crawling onto the foot pedals.

The [American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals](#) recommends that people use restraints on dogs and cats to prevent harm to the animals, the driver and other passengers, says Louise Murray, a veterinarian and vice president of the [ASPCA](#)'s Bergh Memorial Animal Hospital in New York.

Pets not only shouldn't ride in the driver's lap, they also shouldn't ride in the front passenger seat because of the risk of injury from a deploying airbag, Murray says. "The best way for people to think about this is to compare the dog to having a child in the car," she says.

Pet restraints include harnesses, hard- or soft-sided travel crates and vehicle seats.

People are taking their dogs along for leisure rides, on local errands and on other trips, according to the online survey by AAA and Kurgo of 1,000 dog owners who have driven with their dogs in the past 12 months. Other risks of riding with unrestrained dogs: After a crash, the animal might run away or prevent rescue personnel from reaching injured motorists.

Almost four in 10 (39%) households in the USA have a dog, the American Pet Products Association says.

"Our dogs are traveling with us so much more this day and age," Huebner-Davidson says. "They really have become part of our family. We want to make sure we're buckling up our dogs but also keeping our focus on the road."