

# Carsickness

by William E. Campbell

To appreciate fully the problem of carsickness we have to project to the canine some human sensations. This may not be the most scientific way to view the problem, but it so happens that dogs suffer motion sickness in the same situations as do people and they respond to medical and behavioral therapy much the same. This program for carsickness has helped thousands of dog owners who have followed it properly. Chances are excellent it can help you and your pet as well.

## **Know The Cause**

There are several causes for carsickness. One is created when a new puppy, already upset about being taken from its litter, is further upset by the car ride to its new home. If the puppy tends toward motion sickness, the outcome is nearly always predictable---it will start salivating and then vomit. If the new owners then make too big a fuss over it, pour on too much sympathy or otherwise get upset emotionally, the puppy senses that something seems genuinely "wrong" and the seeds are then sown for future carsickness. The way puppy owners react to situations provides a model for the way the pups ought to react. I call this the "interpretive factor," and it is usually more important than the fact that the puppy got sick in the first place. It is far better to ignore the carsickness than to overreact emotionally, no matter how sympathetic we may feel for the puppy, or even an adult dog.

## **Social Lack**

Some puppies that have been handled very little suffer the problem. In dogs and people there is an area of the brain called the vestibular center. It is involved in the integration of many of the sensory impressions we receive. It is especially important in the coordination of visual, tactile (touch) and balance functions. In very young animals there is a vital need for stimulation of this brain center if proper sensory integration is to develop.

In carsick dogs there is often a lack of this early handling. There has been little experience of getting picked up, turned about and even cuddled upside down. These dogs later in life may tend to be carsick victims. This is not to suggest that if you have a carsick six month old big dog that you should start hoisting it up as part of your correction program. But if you have a pup or small breed it might be helpful if you do it gently a couple of times a day.

## **Visual Problems**

Another cause seems to be visual. This is also akin to human experience. Many children who are forced to sit in the back seat get carsick. So do many dogs. However, if they sit in the front seat they are fine. It appears that when the vision to the front is restricted, as in the back seat, the objects seen whizzing by out of the side windows has the effect of causing nausea.

## **Bossy Dog**

The last cause to be considered also has a parallel in humans. Some dogs that are bossy, leader types get upset when they cannot control many of life's situations. And the car certainly puts them out of position to control. So, like the bossy child, they get emotionally upset and carsick.

## **Demonstrate Leadership**

Now to prepare the corrective program for your dog. The first step, no matter the cause, is to make sure the pet feels that you are a competent leader. To do this, ask it to do something each time before you pet it. This can be as simple as telling the dog to sit, then petting it with lots of praise. This will transmit the message (after a few days) that you expect it to "earn" its praise and petting. Do not curtail your petting, but just ask for some "function" to be performed before you pet. It is difficult to teach your dog not to be carsick if you cannot get it to function in other ways for you!

### **Start Short**

Take the dog in the front seat of the car for an extremely short ride twice daily; say, just down the block and back home. While getting into the car and all during the ride you must behave jolly, acting as if something awfully good is going to happen. If your pet has a favorite ball, toy or bone, take that along and use it to sustain a happy frame of mind.

Follow this routine a couple of times a day for four days in a row, if possible. Also, do it at different times of day and at night. In this way you are teaching your pet in short, happy rides that the car is not so bad at all, but a pleasant place to be.

If the dog gets sick, ignore it for the time being and do not clean up until you are back home and the dog cannot see you doing it. When the short rides no longer produce any signs of nausea, proceed to the next step.

### **Slowly Extend**

Lengthen the time and distance of the rides. Do this by five minute segments. When you reach twenty minutes per ride you then must vary the routes you take. Try a main highway, a hilly or curved road, etc. All the while, keep up the jollity and happy behavior.

### **Use a Friend**

When the longer rides fail to produce nausea, have the dog ride in the back seat of the car. If your pet resists, take along another family member or friend. Warn them against coddling the dog. Have them do the jolly business as well...play with the ball or toy, etc.

When you have reached this point the program should be carried on for six weeks with at least one car ride every other day in order to reach permanent success. If there is any backsliding merely start again with the short rides and you should get things in hand within a few days.

Some dogs have special quirks relative to the direction you take them. If you find this with your dog, do not avoid going in that direction; just proceed at first for shorter distances that way. I recall a Poodle that got ill every time the car traveled in the direction of the groomer! The program of shortened rides in that direction works well in such cases.

### **Consult Your Vet**

If your dog has been on medication for carsickness, discuss with your veterinarian the method by which to wean it off the drug. Sometimes a "cold turkey" approach works well. However, the doctor knows your dog, and the medical directions must be strictly adhered to for success.

### **Avoid Food**

A word about using food for rewards as a means to correct carsickness. I have found it disrupting. After all, it is the digestive system we need to calm down and food only tends to excite it.

Follow this program for as long as it takes to solve the problem. It might take as long as six weeks or as short a time as a few days. Whichever may be your case, be patient and good natured through it all and you should achieve a pet that is a joy in the car.