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A Car Seat for Fluffy? It's the Safe Way to Go

LYNNETTE WALCZAK of Franklin, Tenn., loves driving with her dogs. One of them, a fluffy American Eskimo, rode around on her lap for years. But it took only a split second on an October day five years ago for Ms. Walczak to realize that driving with an animal loose in the car was foolish. That's when Destin, her 60-pound Labrador-golden retriever mix, tumbled out of a window in the backseat of her Jeep Grand Cherokee when she was turning onto a four-lane highway.

Ms. Walczak didn't see the dog fall, but she said she believed it must have been pushing its nose out the window while she was making what she said was a relatively slow turn. She stopped traffic to pick up Destin, who was dazed but not hurt, from the highway.

"From that day forward, I'm a doggie seat belt advocate," added Ms. Walczak, publisher of the blog *The Fun Times Guide to Dogs* (dogs.thefuntimesguide.com).

Today, car and pet product manufacturers are betting that more pet owners will buckle in their animals, and to encourage them they are offering many types of restraining devices, from simple harnesses that attach to seat belts to more elaborate barriers and safety cages.

For drivers accustomed to putting infants or young children in safety seats, protecting pets would seem to be a logical next step. But animal restraints are not widely used, and it may not be easy to significantly increase the number of people who use them.

For one thing, although driving without securing a small child in a car seat is illegal in every state, there are no laws banning pets from roaming about in cars. About half the states have laws requiring that an animal be tethered if it is riding in the back of a pickup truck.

In addition, some safety devices available are complicated, and there is confusion about how best to use them — the safest way to hook up a tether, for example.

Pet safety advocates point out that restraints are meant to protect people as well as pets. An unsecured animal is subject to the same laws of physics as a loose object. Should the car crash into a barrier at 40 miles per hour, the animal would be thrown forward at the same speed, potentially injuring people in the car, said Sheriff Patrick Perez of Kane County, Ill. And at accident scenes, he said, unsecured pets could bolt into traffic, creating additional hazards.

Another concern stems from airbags, which can be deadly for animals riding in drivers' laps.

"At 35 miles per hour, you get rear-ended, what happens with your airbag? That airbag will kill a small dog sitting on your lap, just like a child," said Christina Selter, founder of Bark Buckle UP, a San Diego-based organization that advocates that pet owners secure their animals in safety devices, whether they're traveling to the grocery store or heading across the country on vacation.

Ms. Selter, whose organization collects and analyzes pet safety data, said that even when safety restraints were used, they were often used incorrectly.

She recommended that most dogs be secured in harnesses that strapped across their chests and attached to car seat belts, like the PetBuckle harness, which clips onto dogs and into seat belts. For pets that need to move a little bit, there are tethers — like the Bamboo Quick Control Leash, which comes with a seat belt latch — that attaches to the harness and clips onto the car seat belt.

Harnesses are not for really small dogs, Ms. Selter warned. "Wiener dogs should not be in a harness," she said. "If he falls off the seat, it will snap his back."

Pet safety advocates also warn that dogs should never be tethered to seat belts by their collars. "If you hook the tether to the pet's collar, if you have to stop suddenly, you could injure the pet's neck," said Thomas James, president of PetTravelCenter.com, a Web site for people who want to take their pets on vacations.

For smaller dogs, manufacturers now offer pet car seats that elevate dogs and let them look out of the car window. The Skybox Booster Seat (kurgo.com) is one example. Mr. James said the booster seat should buckle into the car's seat belt system. But he warned that pets would not be secure if they were not tethered or harnessed, too.

Car manufacturers are getting into the pet safety business, too. Volvo offers pet barriers that bolt into the rear of some models. And, in late November, Toyota is to begin selling a new model, the Venza, designed for "active boomers" who think of their pets as their children, Toyota says, now that their real ones are out of the house.

The car will be marketed along with 15 pet products like harnesses, barriers, pet tents and waterproof seat covers, said Bob Zeinstra, national manager for large cars for Toyota.

Mr. Zeinstra said the company's focus groups indicated that pet safety products would help sell cars. The products, manufactured independently from Toyota, will range in price from \$28 for a harness to about \$70 for a barrier, and will be sold through Toyota dealers.

Of course, even the best safety plans can come undone if the pet restraints aren't used properly. This summer, in Springville, Utah, a teenage driver swerved off the road and crashed into another car while trying to catch her pet gerbil. It had escaped from its cage in the car.