

Natural Aids for Motion Sickness

Try a natural approach to preventing and treating your dog's motion sickness.

Randy Kidd, DVM, Ph.D.

Motion sickness is a normal response to a real, perceived, or anticipated movement. Luckily, it is not the most difficult malady to diagnose. Signs and symptoms include nervousness (excessive licking, yawning, panting, salivating, pacing, whining, wet paws as a result of sweating, and so forth). Some dogs will develop diarrhea and defecate or urinate inappropriately, and many dogs fill the car with noxious gasses from their digestive tracts. Nausea or retching (or as scientists refer to it: “retrograde peristaltic contractions,” or RPCs), and vomiting are common symptoms.

Causes. Motion sickness occurs when the body, the inner ear, and the eyes send conflicting signals to the brain. The principal causative mechanism involves stimulation of the vestibular apparatus in the inner ear, which has connections to the emetic center in the brain stem. The chemoreceptor trigger zone (CRTZ) and H-1 Histaminergic receptors are involved in this pathway in dogs, but apparently are less important in cats. Fear of the vehicle may be a contributory factor, and signs may be seen even in a stationary vehicle.

From inside a car, the dog's inner ear may sense rolling motions that the eyes cannot perceive, and conversely, the eyes may perceive movement that the body does not feel. In addition, for some susceptible individuals, even anticipating movement can cause anxiety and symptoms of motion sickness – for example, a dog with a previous experience of motion sickness may become nauseous in the stationary car as the final bags are packed in.

Prognosis and complications. There are no long-term complications – symptoms generally disappear quickly once the journey is over. Dogs may also get accustomed to the ride during a trip that lasts several days, and individuals may improve from repeated exposures to the same type of experience. On the other hand, some animals that become anxious before a journey often experience worsened symptoms, and more effort may be required to get them acclimated to riding.

Risk factors. Several risk factors have been identified in people, and many of these are likely the same for dogs. Obviously, riding in a car, boat, or airplane is the primary risk factor.

Younger children – between ages of 2 and 12 – are most at risk, as are younger dogs. In both people and dogs, the occurrence of motion sickness declines with age. This is probably due to behavioral changes and coping strategies rather than anything inherent in the aging process.

Exposure to unpleasant odors and poor ventilation are two risk factors for humans, so we need to consider how these apply to dogs. It's important to remember that the human idea of a noxious odor may be the fragrance of the gods for dogs. And on the other side of the spectrum, heavy doses of perfume, cologne, or air fresheners may be nauseating stimuli for dogs. Ventilation is important, but this does not mean that a dog should hang its head out the window.

Food intake and the type of foods eaten may be contributing factors. Bulky, greasy meals may help cause motion sickness. The best advice is to feed light (low in proteins and fats and high in carbohydrates) meals or snacks that are low in total calories in the 24 hours before traveling. Interestingly, low intake levels of vitamins A and C and iron are associated with increased incidence of motion sickness in people – perhaps another reason to add some A, C, and iron to your dog's diet.

Conventional drugs. There are several drugs available from your vet that may help combat vomiting, upset stomachs, and anxiety. These drugs fall into the categories of anti-nauseas, anti-histamines, and centrally-acting phenothiazine derivative sedatives that also have anti-emetic effects. Although these drugs may be effective when they are administered several hours before departure, most of them also have a long list of side effects. Read the label to make sure the drug's overall actions are what you really desire.

Natural methods. Many dogs can be trained out of their motion sickness simply by taking them on several short trips that have a happy conclusion (i.e., not a trip to the veterinarian). Moderate exercise 30 minutes or so before departure will help them relax. Keeping them occupied while traveling may be helpful – have a play toy they can chew on and let them watch out the window if possible. On longer trips, provide a place where they can curl up and sleep. Finally, let them grow up – many puppies outgrow their tendencies toward motion sickness.

We are dealing with three primary areas that may affect the animal prone to motion sickness: fear and anxiety, stomach upset, and an upset sense of balance due to perceptual differences between the inner ear, eyes, and body position. There are several natural methods that have been shown to benefit all these.

Flower essences (Bach Flowers). Flower essences especially good for easing tensions that occur during travel include:

Aspen (an original Bach Flower) – for unknown fear or terror, especially for the nervous animal.

Mimulus (an original Bach Flower) – for nervous animals.

Dill (Flower Essence Society) – for the overwhelmed or confused dog, such as during travel or an upset in his normal schedule.

Rescue Remedy (an original Bach Flower) – a five-flower combination for any time there is extreme emotional or physical stress.

Herbal remedies. There are several herbs that have been used for upset stomach and for motion sickness particularly, but the best known and perhaps most effective is ginger, *Zingiber officinale*. Ginger has a long history of medicinal use in traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurvedic (Indian) medicine. Research has shown it to be effective in relieving symptoms of nausea, vomiting, indigestion, flatulence, and dizziness. Ginger works mainly in the digestive tract, where it boosts digestive fluids and neutralizes acids.

Other herbs that help to calm the stomach include peppermint (*Mentha piperita*), chamomile (*Anthemis nobile* or *Matricaria chamomilla*), horehound (*Ballota nigra*), and the Chinese herb Pingandan, a mixture of several herbs.

Herbal remedies offer a mild, short-acting sedative action, and the ones mentioned here are calming to the stomach or specifically anti-emetic. Many herbs, however, are not pleasing to a dog's palate. You can use capsules or non-alcoholic tinctures or pour a mild tea over your dog's favorite treats. For dosage amounts for capsules and tinctures, follow the label directions and adapt them for the weight of the dog versus a normal human's weight (usually considered to be 120 to 150 pounds).

The oils of several plants (including basil, ginger, chamomile, and peppermint) have been shown to relieve nausea when they are included in a mild tea. The oils can also be used as an aromatherapy application in which they can be dispensed throughout the car during travel. Simply put a few drops on a piece of cotton and place the cotton on the dashboard, or use a dispenser that hangs from the rear-view mirror. You can also make an anti-nausea massage by mixing eight drops of chamomile and four drops of ginger into one ounce of vegetable oil and rub it on your dog's belly.

Homeopathic remedies. These include the following:

Cocculus – the primary homeopathic treatment for motion sickness, especially if nausea and dizziness are present. Cocculus is indicated when the symptoms worsen in fresh air and from the smell of food.

Nux vomica – a potent remedy for stomach upsets and indicated for motion sickness accompanied by nausea. It is especially good for the dog that is sensitive to noises and odors.

Kalium phosphate – used to treat anxiety and stress and often referred to as a natural tranquilizer. It is especially good for treating a nervous stomach.

Petroleum – indicated for dizziness and nausea that occur when riding in a car or boat. This remedy is most appropriate for individuals who feel faint and for those who salivate or sweat excessively.

Tabacum – a remedy for motion sickness with severe nausea and vomiting where the symptoms are aggravated by tobacco smoke but open air or vomiting bring relief.

I would give a 30c dose of the remedy I'd chosen from the list above, several hours before travel, and then repeat it every few hours if indicated – for a total of three to five doses.

Traditional Chinese medicine (acupuncture and Eastern herbs) has a long history of alleviating the signs of motion sickness.

A large body of clinical evidence supports the effectiveness of acupuncture for suppressing nausea associated with motion sickness, chemotherapy, the postoperative state, and pregnancy, as well as for treating several other conditions. Acupressure has also been used for the same conditions, although scientific evidence proving its efficacy is not as great as that for acupuncture.

Massage. A good massage shortly before or during the trip seems to be helpful for some individuals. A whole-body massage relieves tension and can activate local acupuncture points that calm the gastrointestinal tract. Be sure to include the following areas: above and medial to the dog's wrist, the area below and lateral to the knee and along the spine and the belly (which will include most of the major points for activating organ systems).

As a general rule, natural remedies offer a mild alternative to more severe conventional drugs and they don't have the side effects of drugs. As with all medicines, they may be very effective for some individuals, they may not have much effect on others.

Randy Kidd, DVM, Ph.D., has been a practicing veterinarian for more than 30 years, with 20 years of experience in holistic healthcare. He is a past president of the American Holistic Veterinary Association and a frequent contributor to Dog World. Contact him at thedoctorisin@bowtieinc.com.

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