

Seniors more likely to crash when driving with pet, study finds

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Accident risk doubled for those who always drove with their animal in the car.

(HealthDay)—Animals make great companions for senior citizens, but elderly people who always drive with a pet in the car are far more likely to crash than those who never drive with a pet, researchers have found.

The new study included 2,000 [licensed drivers](#) aged 70 and older. The nearly 700 participants who had pets were asked how often they drove with their pet in the car.

Among those who always drove with their pets, the [crash risk](#) was twice as high as among those who never drove with their pet. Crash rates for those who sometimes or rarely drove with pets were about the same as the rates among those who didn't have pets, according to the study, which was published in a recent issue of the journal *Accident Analysis and Prevention*.

Taking Fido along for the ride was a fairly common practice among the elderly pet owners, with more than half of these seniors acknowledging that they took their pet with them in the car at least occasionally. Pets typically rode on the front passenger seat or in the back seat, said the researchers from the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

The findings are "consistent with previous studies looking at all drivers, which indicate that slightly more than half of all drivers take a pet with them at times," study senior author Gerald McGwin, a professor in the departments of epidemiology, ophthalmology and surgery, said in a university news release.

"It's interesting to note that earlier surveys indicate that 83 percent of those surveyed agreed that an unrestrained dog was likely dangerous in a moving vehicle, yet only 16 percent have ever used any type of restraint on their own pet," McGwin said.

"This is the first study to evaluate the presence of pets in a vehicle as a potential internal [distraction](#) for elderly drivers," he said. "The increased [crash rate](#) for [elderly drivers](#) who always drive with pets is important in the context of increasing driver awareness about potentially dangerous driving habits."

"There is no direct evidence that driving with pets is or is not a threat to public safety," McGwin said. "However, indirect evidence exists based on distracted-driving research on texting, eating or interacting with electronics or other passengers. And there are certainly anecdotal reports in the news media of crashes and even fatalities caused by drivers distracted by a pet in the vehicle."

More information: The U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has more about [distracted driving](#).

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