

Check the pedigree of pets' car-safety equipment

BY MELANIE D. G. KAPLAN

This summer, as I have many times over the past 15 years, I took to the road with a beagle. From Washington, Hammy and I headed south, then north, then west — until we hit the Pacific Ocean. He loves sniffing out new places and knows the drill in the car: He hops into his plastic crate, which is secured in the back of my decade-old Honda CR-V, curls into a bagel shape and sleeps until the next rest stop.

I later found out that while we were road-tripping, the Center for Pet Safety (CPS), a nonprofit research and consumer advocacy organization, was administering crash tests of pet crates and small carriers. The testing took place at MGA Research, an independent National Highway Traffic Safety Administration-contracted testing laboratory in Manassas, Va. I didn't really want to think about the possibility of a crash — nobody does — but the more I learned about product testing, the more I began to question my own practices.

Like most pet owners I know, I put a considerable amount of thought and time into keeping my little guy safe on trips, whether it's a drive over the Potomac River or across the country. At the very least, most of us know not to drive with an animal loose in the back of a pick-up truck or in a carrier on the roof, Mitt Romney-style; and we know that a dog on the driver's lap is a recipe for disaster. But in an accident, would Hammy be as well protected as I am in my seat belt? Probably not.

Until now, consumers have had very little information about which products are most reliable at keeping dogs and cats safe in the car. With the completion of CPS's recent crash tests and its forthcoming safety product standards, the organization — not affiliated with the pet product industry — is, thankfully, shedding some light on the safest ways to restrain four-legged passengers.

Lindsey Wolko, a management consultant, founded CPS in 2011, inspired by an injured dog and a car safety harness that she said did nothing to keep her dog safe. After the incident, she realized the only way to know for sure which products worked was to put them through rigorous testing. She began testing harnesses at a crash-test facility, simulating a front-end collision. One harness broke at the connection point. Another, which the manufacturer claimed to have crash-tested, decapitated the artificial test dog.

"It's important for pet owners to understand that there is a performance component when you shop for a product," said Wolko, who runs CPS on a volunteer basis. "If you're looking for something that will provide protection in a crash, most of the products won't do that."

Wolko called the pet industry



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Hammy the beagle's travel gear was upgraded to a Sleepypod Clickit Sport from a plastic crate.

Tips for your four-legged road-tripper

What's the best way to transport your pet when you hit the road? Take into account his size, shape and personality, and consider the following guidelines from the Center for Pet Safety before making your purchase.

- Some harnesses prevent only distraction, while others provide crash protection; choose the latter. Look for harnesses that do not have an extension tether. Giving your dog freedom to move around means room for injury in a crash.
- If you're going to put your pet in a seat, make it the back seat, and don't ever connect a safety device to your dog's collar or walking harness.
- Pick the right size crate for your pet, which is generally no more than six inches longer than the animal's body — just enough room to be comfortable.
- If you have a small soft- or hard-sided carrier or crate for dogs weighing less than 40 pounds, CPS recommends not using the seat belt to secure it. If the carrier isn't structurally sound, the seat belt may crush the product in an accident. Instead, place the carrier on the floor behind the driver or passenger seat. Secure hard-sided crates in the back of a vehicle using strength-rated cargo anchor straps, not bungee cords.
- If you're using a booster seat (most of which have not been tested for safety), CPS recommends using it with a crash-tested harness product that connects to the seat belt system, such as the Sleepypod Clickit Sport. CPS is currently working on a pilot study to educate pet owners about boosters.
- Nose and floppy ears out the window? If you're safety-conscious, think of it as part of a bygone era. Flying debris can damage dogs' eyes, and if they have enough freedom to lean out the window, they won't be safe in a crash.

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"a big cloudy mess of marketing" in which manufacturers make ungrounded claims about safety. "But what pet owners don't know is that the industry is highly unregulated," she said. "Manufacturers can claim anything they want with no oversight. They can openly claim that they crash-tested it even if it fails the test miserably."

CPS's test in July, funded by Subaru, tested the crashworthiness of pet crates and small carriers in crash situations. CPS used test dogs with metal interiors, ranging from 15 to 110 pounds and engineered with the same center of gravity as a real dog.

The test measured the performance of four crates from manufacturers that had made claims of crash protection. The biggest surprise, Wolko said, is that two of the crates considered the safest had faulty connection points, and one collapsed on the test dog.

The top-performing crate, for dogs up to 75 pounds, was the Gunner Kennels G1 Intermediate with eight-foot tie-down straps (\$500). The top carriers for smaller dogs were the PetEgo Jet Set Forma Frame carrier, with an Isofix-Latch Connection that snaps the carrier firmly into place (\$150-\$160), and super-stylish Sleepypod Mobile Pet Bed with PPRS Handilock, which straps into the seat (\$180).

The test also included some budget — \$150 or less — plastic crates (tested under "carriers" since they generally have handles for carrying). On the CPS website,

I found the crash-test video for the product that most resembles mine, which was shown with a 15-pound test dog. In the video, the carrier remains in the seat during the crash (secured with a seat belt), but the plastic fractures like a thin sheet of Styrofoam, and the test dachshund flies out and tumbles through the air in slow motion, ears splayed out. This is what Wolko calls a "complete failure."

Similar tests were performed in 2013 with pet harnesses, and the Sleepypod Clickit Utility (\$90-\$100) was the only product that performed satisfactorily. (The company has since rolled out its Sport model, which has gone through CPS's certification process). For all the products it tests, CPS publishes standards for manufacturers and guidelines for consumers; the latter can be found on its website.

When I told Wolko how Hammy rides and briefed her on a quick survey I took among my friends to find out how their canines travel (such as loose in the back of an SUV, harnessed with a tether, or free on a hammock between the front and back seats), she winced — not surprising from someone who lives in a world of worst-case scenarios.

"When pets ride free and easy, there are a lot of risks — to you, your pet and the other drivers on the road," she said, stressing the difference between restraining a dog to avoid distraction while driving (which all the products may do) and for safety. "When your dog rides without proper restraint, in an accident, he will become a projectile." As for a dog riding in a passenger's lap, she reminded me that this is illegal with babies and children for good reason.

I asked her how we could improve our practices, short of everyone purchasing a \$500 crate. For dogs 15 pounds and lighter, she suggests full containment in a carrier, and for larger dogs, harnesses are a solid option. Just make sure not to undermine the performance of a harness by adding an extension tether, she said. "A good harness design will give your pet just enough freedom to sit or lie down," she said. "It takes a few trips for your pet to acclimate to a more restricted ride, but every dog we've worked with adapts within a few training trips."

I haven't yet decided where Hammy and I will head on our next trip, but I think his next adventure might be getting used to a new travel restraint.

Wolko acknowledges that being an educated consumer can be expensive. "To get a product that will really perform, we have to spend more," she said. "It's a shame we have to put a price on safety."

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