

## Driving with Pets

Sandy Michelson loves her mini terrier, Marshmallow. He's part of her family. "He's my baby," she said with a smile. She held the small dog in her arms. "I take him with me everywhere."

Sandy often drove her car with Marshmallow on her lap. "He loved sticking his head out the window. It was so cute." She thought it was safe since he was so small. "I could still reach the steering wheel. I thought if something happened, I'd just hold onto him. He'd be fine."

She was wrong.

On a Saturday afternoon, Sandy was taking Marshmallow to get a haircut. "It had been rainy. The roads were a little slick.

Marshmallow was on my lap. I put one hand on his back to hold him still. Then I used the other hand to turn into the parking lot. I didn't notice that there was a truck behind me."

The truck's driver didn't realize Sandy had slowed down and started to turn. It was too late to stop on the wet roads. The truck hit the back of Sandy's car.

Sandy's car flew forward. The airbag deployed, It kept her from having a big injury. "I got some cuts and scrapes. I got whiplash." Whiplash is damage to the neck muscles from the sudden crash.

"Marshmallow is so small. But I couldn't hold on to him." The airbag hit the dog's back legs' It sent him flying into the side of the door. Both of his back legs were broken.

"He's getting better," said Sandy. She touched the casts on Marshmallow's legs. "But he's in pain a lot. He needs help going to the bathroom. And all those doctor bills! It's going to take me a long time to pay for it."



Sandy was given a ticket for not using a turn signal.

Recently in the news, driving with distractions has been a popular topic. In many places it is illegal to send text messages while driving. In some places it is illegal to talk on a cell phone while driving. Drivers who are distracted can have as big of a problem as someone driving drunk.

But what about driving with pets?

"Sadly, we see it all the time," says Officer Terry Ferguson from the county sheriff's office.

"People don't seem to think anything is wrong with having a pet free in their car."

No one is exactly sure how many accidents are caused each year because of pets in vehicles. But one study estimates that there more than 20,000 of these accidents every year across the country.

"Pets can distract the driver in so many ways," explained Officer Ferguson. "The animal may start barking. It may go to the bathroom. It may start chewing on something. The driver's

attention goes to the animal. This means the driver is not paying attention to driving.”

In some cases, the pet just simply gets in the way. “Maybe the driver can’t turn the steering wheel because the pet is in the way. Or the pet may block the driver’s view. Once a cat got scared by car horn. The cat tried to hide under the car’s pedals on the floor. The driver couldn’t break with the cat under the pedal. They ended up crashing into a tree.

When a driver is behind the wheel, he or she needs to do their very best to pay attention to the road. In 2009 over 5,400 people were killed in accidents caused by a distracted driver. Almost 450,000 were injured.

Only one state, Hawaii, has a law that forbids drivers from having an animal on their lap. Other states and cities are considering similar laws.

“We did a big promotion last summer. We handed out pet restraint systems for free. Basically the system works like a seatbelt for the pet. But people gave all sorts of excuses as to why they didn’t think they needed it. People said their pets were well behaved. They said the animal wouldn’t like it. Or they think that their pet was so small that it didn’t matter.”

In reality, an animal in a car that stops suddenly flies through the vehicle like a cannon ball. Imagine a car moving 35 miles an hour crashes. A 50 pound animal would be thrown forward with 1,500 pounds of force.

“Last summer there was an accident. A dog in the back of a pickup truck was killed from a crash. It was a tragedy. But it could have been easily prevented,” said Officer Ferguson.

“I never go anywhere now with Marshmallow without having his safety restraint on in the car. At first he whined about it. But I told him it was for his own good,” said Sandy. “I love him too much not to try to keep him safe.”