

Driving with Pets

Sandy Michelson thinks of her mini terrier, Marshmallow, as a part of her family. “He’s my baby,” she said with a smile, holding 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 figured that it was safe since he was so small. “I didn’t have to reach around him too much to hold onto the steering wheel. I figured if something happened, I’d just grab him and hold him, and he’d be fine.”

She was wrong.

On a Saturday afternoon last month, Sandy was taking Marshmallow to the groomer’s. “It had been rainy, and the roads were a little slick. Marshmallow was on my lap as usual, and I put one hand on his back to hold him still while I tried to use the other hand to turn the car 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 until it was too late to stop on the slick roads. The truck hit the back of Sandy’s car.

Sandy’s car flew forward. The airbag deployed, preventing her from having a serious injury. “I ended up with some cuts and scrapes, and a mild case of whiplash.” Whiplash is damage to the muscles in the back of the neck due to the force of the sudden impact.

“But even as small as Marshmallow is, I couldn’t hold on to him.” The airbag hit his back legs

and sent him flying into the side of the door. Both of his back legs were broken.

“He’s recovering,” said Sandy, lightly stroking the casts on Marshmallow’s legs. “But he’s in pain a lot and can’t even go to the bathroom without help. And all those veterinarian bills! It’s going to take me a long time to pay for his medical care.”



Sandy was given a ticket for failure to use a turn signal.

Recently in the news, driving with distractions has been a popular topic. Many states and cities have passed – or are considering passing – laws that make it illegal to send text messages while driving. Some states have made it illegal to talk on a cell phone while driving. Research has repeatedly shown that drivers who are distracted can be as impaired as someone driving drunk.

But what about driving with pets?

“Unfortunately, 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 unrestrained in their car.”

No one is exactly sure how many accidents are caused each year because of pets riding in vehicles, but a recent study estimates that there

are tens of thousands 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 or go to the bathroom or start chewing on something. The driver’s attention goes to the animal, which 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 easily because the pet is in the way, or the pet blocks the driver’s view. In one local case, a cat got scared by the horn on a passing car and tried to hide under the car’s pedals on the floor. The driver couldn’t break with the cat under the pedal and 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. One federal agency calculated that 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 while driving. Other states and cities are considering similar laws.

“We did a big promotion last summer, handing out pet restraint systems for free to interested pet owners. Basically the system works like a seatbelt for the pet. But I kept hearing people giving all sorts of excuses as to why they didn’t think they needed it. People said their pets were well behaved or that the animal wouldn’t like it or that their pet was so small that there was no point.”

In reality, an unrestrained animal in a car that stops suddenly flies through the vehicle like a

cannon ball. In a car moving 35 miles an hour, a 50 pound animal would be thrown forward with 1,500 pounds of force.

“Last summer in another part of the state, there was an accident when a dog riding in the back of a pickup truck was killed from the impact of 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.”