

Consumer Alert

PET-PRODUCT SAFETY CLAIMS UNDER SCRUTINY

Dogs love to be in the car, and loving owners love to let them. According to AAA, however, an unrestrained 10-pound dog that travels in a vehicle at 30 mph will exert about 300 pounds of force in an accident. "Not only are [pets] a distraction, but [they] could potentially fly forward and hit another passenger or certainly injure themselves," says pet-living expert Kristen Levine.

As a result, many pet parents likely have seen an expansion in the marketplace of products that are touted to secure the safety of their "children" while they're in automobiles. These include pet seats, new-fangled harnesses and devices to secure pet carriers and crates.

The problem: Claims about the performance of these products are based on various criteria and standards, and we join others in uncertainty about which claims to believe.

Among the recent scrutiny comes a study by Center for Pet Safety on the crashworthiness of pet carriers and crates that are marketed with the words "testing," "crash testing" or "crash protection." The study's findings: Many manufacturers instruct consumers who secure a pet crate in the cargo area of a vehicle to rely on a seatback, "and that is absolutely the worst thing that they can do," says Lindsey Wolko, who is the founder of Center for Pet Safety. Wolko says a manufacturer's claim that its carrier is safe for vehicle travel doesn't mean that the product will provide the amount of protection that the consumer deserves or assumes will be provided.

Sandy Robins, who has covered pet products for Consumers Digest, isn't surprised that more pet-safety products have been introduced, considering that various data indicate that more travelers are taking along their pets. "It's easier to travel with pets than ever before, because more places are putting out the



welcome mat for pets," she says.

"Ten years ago, it was almost unheard of to hear that people were taking their cats on airplanes to travel," says Michael Leung, who is a co-founder of pet-product-maker Sleepypod. "Now, we hear that all of the time."

Leung says his company's sales of pet carriers and other pet products for travel are on the rise, and retailers tell him that the pet-travel category has grown significantly.

However, Robins calls the standards that are said to be used to support pet-travel-product safety claims a contentious subject. "People test to different standards," she tells Consumers Digest. "This is a problem."

Some pet-product manufacturers test their products in automobile crashes using criteria for the United States (Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard for child-restraint systems) as well as Australia and Sweden.

"We believe that there should be regulations for traveling with pets and

standardized testing for assessing the safety of pet-travel products," says Richard Casey, who is the president of 4x4 North America, which works with Swedish pet-product manufacturer MIM Construction.

Consumers Digest's research into pet-travel products is at its preliminary stages, but we're intrigued by the work of Center for Pet Safety (centerforpetsafety.org). Wolko stresses that the organization is nonprofit and independent, although the group sells a pretesting service to pet-product manufacturers.

"It's very difficult when pet owners are hit from all sides with people saying, 'This is a great product, this is wonderful,' and the manufacturer puts money behind that marketing," Wolko says. "Unfortunately, when we put it into the test laboratory and we put it through its paces, the products just don't hold up."

Wolko tells Consumers Digest that her organization is conducting a third study on pet seats.

Stay tuned.