Pets on Planes Lesson 1: Preparing and Receiving Pets for Air Travel

Last Modified:

While most pets arrive safely to their destination and are happily reunited with their owners, some pets become injured or even die during air travel.

This lesson is designed for pet owners who are planning to travel with their dogs or cats and airport personnel who have the responsibility of accepting dogs or cats for air travel. After reviewing this lesson, you will understand some of USDA’s requirements for air travel and factors that can improve the safety of dogs and cats during air travel. These factors include the suitability of the animal’s kennel and the health and readiness of the dog or cat for air travel.

Let's get started! Read through the lesson below, watch the video, or download and review the training on your device. When ready, test your knowledge by answering the questions in the next section.

Lesson 1: Preparing and Receiving Pets for Air Travel

Inspecting the Kennel

When an owner arrives at the airport with their dog or cat, they should be asked questions about the suitability of the animal’s kennel for air travel. These include questions about:

- The adequacy of the kennel's size for the dog or cat
- The kennel's construction and quality
- The safety and cleanliness of the kennel
- The location of the watering and feeding containers and
- The labeling of the kennel

Kennel Size

Make sure that the kennel is the appropriate size for the dog or cat.

Construction and Quality

Consider the following items when inspecting the kennel’s construction:

- The kennel should be hard sided with secure fasteners that are strong enough to withstand the normal rigors of air transport while containing the animal securely and comfortably.
- The kennel should be designed so that the door can be securely closed and easily opened without requiring special or sharp tools.
- The exterior handle(s) or handholds should be sturdy enough to:
    - Enable someone to lift the kennel without tilting it, and
    - Ensure that anyone handling the kennel can avoid unnecessary contact with the animal.
- The kennel **must have** adequate ventilation with openings on three sides and the door.
- The kennel **must be** free of toxic or harmful materials, treatments, paint, or preservatives.

Kennel Cleanliness and Safety

Check to see that the kennel is clean and safe.

- The kennel **must be** clean and sanitized.

- The kennel floor **must be** leak-proof and covered with an unused litter pad or collection tray.
- The kennel's interior **must be** free of sharp points or edges that could injure the animal.
- The design of the kennel **must allow** the animal to be quickly and easily removed in an emergency.
- The kennel **must be** designed to prevent any part of the animal from protruding outside the enclosure in a way that could result in injury to the animal or to any nearby person or animal.

Watering and Feeding Containers

The food and water dishes **must be** attached to the inside of the kennel door so that they can be easily reached without opening the door. Water bottles should not be attached to the outside of the kennel.

Kennel Labeling

When evaluating kennel labels, look for the following:

- The kennel **must display** labels with the words "Live Animal" in 1-inch letters on the top and at least one side of the kennel.
- The kennel **must display** upright arrow labels showing the kennel's upright position.

More than One Dog or Cat in the Same Kennel

USDA regulations require that dogs and cats be at least 8-weeks old and fully weaned before traveling. Usually only one dog or cat is allowed in each kennel. However, two live puppies or kittens may be transported in the same kennel if they are 8 weeks to 6 months of age, of comparable size, and weigh 20 pounds (9 Kg) or less. More than one dog or cat may be transported in the same kennel if they are traveling to research facilities and adhere to the following restrictions:

- They are weaned puppies less than 8 weeks of age and of comparable size, or
- They are unweaned littermates accompanied by the mother.

Dog and Cat Health and Readiness for Travel

Consider a dog's or cat’s health and readiness for air travel.

Age

The dog or cat must be old enough to travel. USDA regulations require that dogs and cats be at least 8-weeks old and fully weaned before traveling. No more than two live puppies or kittens 8 weeks to 6 months of age, that are of comparable size, and weighing 20 pounds (9 Kg) or less, may be transported in the same kennel.

Breed

Some breeds of dogs and cats may have more problems during air travel. Extra care is required with many short-nosed dogs during air travel. Short-nosed dogs or “brachycephalic” dogs are susceptible to increased risk of heat stroke and breathing problems when exposed to stress or extreme heat. Examples of short-nosed breeds include Boston Terrier, Boxer, Brussels Griffon, Dutch Pug, English Bulldog, English Toy Spaniel, French Bulldog, Japanese Chin, Lhasa Apso. Examples of short-nosed cat breeds include Persian, Himalayan, and Burmese. These problems also occur in crossbred versions of these dogs and cats.

Temperament

The dog or cat should have the appropriate temperament for air travel. Dogs and cats traveling on airlines should be well behaved and not aggressive.

Travel Documentation

Make sure that the dog or cat has the appropriate travel documentation.

Health and Acclimation Certificate

A Health and Acclimation certificate should be available. The Health and Acclimation certificate should indicate the animal’s readiness for travel and any constraints (including the acceptable range of travel temperature). The Health and Acclimation certificate must be signed by a licensed veterinarian within 10 days of the animal’s travel date.

Rabies Vaccination Certificate

Some States and foreign countries require a Rabies Vaccination Certificate signed by a licensed veterinarian.

Information about the Animal's Owner

Also make sure that the owner information is available. The owner information should include name, address, phone number(s) and other contact information for the owner (consignor) and the receiving party (consignee).

Routing Information

Make sure that the travel information, including the animal's final destination, is visible. The correct routing information should be placed in a pouch that is securely attached to the outside of the kennel. The pouch should be readily accessible to assist those who will be routing the dog or cat to the correct destination.

Feeding and Watering Information

Information describing the feeding and watering schedule for the dog or cat should be available. The owner or owner's agent must certify that each animal was offered food and water within 4 hours of delivering the dog or cat to the airport. A document indicating the time and date that food and water were last offered as well as feeding and watering instructions for next 24-hour period should be included in the pouch on the kennel.

Document Pouch

Check to see that all documents are securely attached to the kennel. Shipping documents should include but are not limited to food and water instructions, health and acclimation certificate, owner information, and routing information.

Summary

In summary, when inspecting a dog or cat kennel for air travel, check to see that:

- The kennel is the proper size for the dog or cat.
- The kennel is of high-quality construction with:
    - A secure latch for the door

    - A sturdy handle
    - Secure fasteners
    - Adequate ventilation
    - A litter pad or other means to keep the dog or cat clean from urine and feces Accessible feeding and watering containers
    - Food in a plastic container
    - Handles or handholds that will allow cargo personal to pick up the kennel without tilting it

Also check to see that the kennel has proper labels including:

- “Live Animal” labels on the top and side of the kennel
- Labels indicating the direction for placing the kennel upright
- An easily accessible plastic pouch containing the following:
    - The dog or cat owner's information
    - Health certificates
    - The schedule for feeding and watering the dog or cat

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Downloadable Lesson Files

Lesson 1-2 iBook (zip)

(ZIP, 362.87 MB)

You must have the free iBook reader installed to open this file.

Lesson 1 PDF
Lesson 2 PDF

Test Your Knowledge

Watch a short video and then answer a question about each of the following topics.

Expand All

Kennel Size

Question: The kennel should be large enough for the dog or cat _____.

A. And a bag of food
B. To jump easily for exercise
C. To stand up

Answer: C. The kennel must be large enough that the animal can easily stand up, turn around, sit erect, and lie down in a natural position.

Kennel Construction and Quality

Question: Which is **NOT** a critical requirement for kennel construction?

A. The kennel must have wheels for easy transport.
B. The kennel must have adequate ventilation.
C. The kennel must have a secure door latch.

Answer: A. Wheels are not required on kennels used for air travel.

Kennel Cleanliness and Safety

Question: A safe kennel MUST have _____.

A. A leak-proof floor with an unused litter pad
B. A swivel handle located on top
C. Wheel locks

Answer: A. It is important that the kennel floor is leak proof with an unused litter pad.

Water and Feeding Containers

Question: The dishes for food and water must be attached _____.

A. Outside the kennel door
B. Inside the kennel door

C. On top of the kennel

Answer: B. The food and water dishes must be attached to the inside of the kennel door so that they can be easily reached without opening the door.

Kennel Labeling

Question: There must be a label on the outside of the kennel indicating _____.

A. That a live animal is inside
B. The dog's or cat's breed or heritage
C. The dog's or cat's country, home state, or province

Answer: A. There must be a label on the outside of the kennel indicating that a live animal is inside.

Age

Question: Dogs or cats must be at least _____ of age for air travel.

A. 8 weeks
B. 1 year
C. 15 weeks

Answer: A. USDA regulations require that dogs and cats be at least 8 weeks old and fully weaned before traveling.

Breed

Question: The dog or cat breeds that are more likely to have health problems during air travel have _____.

A. Short noses
B. Long hair year-round
C. Long tails

Answer: A. Extra care is required with many short-nosed dogs and cats during air travel. They are susceptible to increased risk of heat stroke and breathing problems when exposed to stress or extreme heat.

Temperament

Question: Dogs and cats traveling by air should be _____.

A. Aggressive enough to fend for themselves
B. Given a tranquilizer
C. Well-behaved

Answer: C. Dogs and cats traveling on airlines should be well behaved and non-aggressive.

Health and Acclimation Certificate

Question: The Health and Acclimation Certificate for air travel should include _____.

A. The dog's or cat's weight
B. The temperature range within which the dog or cat can travel
C. Medical operations the dog or cat has had in the last year

Answer: B. The Health and Acclimation Certificate should specify the temperature range within which the dog or cat may travel.

Rabies Vaccination Certificate

Question: A Rabies Vaccination Certificate is required _____.

A. If the dog has been ill within the past year
B. By some but not all states
C. Under all conditions

Answer: B. Some states and foreign countries require a Rabies Vaccination Certificate signed by a licensed veterinarian.

Airline Routing Information

Question: The routing information is used to _____.

A. Specify the orientation of the kennel
B. Assure the dog or cat arrives at the proper destination
C. Clarify the emergency contact for the dog or cat

Answer: B. The routing information is used to route the dog or cat to the proper destination.

Feeding and Watering Information

Question: The feeding and watering information should indicate _____.

A. The type of and amount of food that the airlines should feed the dog or cat
B. When the dog or cat was offered food within 4 hours before airport arrival
C. How the food and water should be presented to the dog or cat

Answer: B. It is important for the airlines to know when the dog or cat was last offered food before departure.

Document Pouch

Question: The pouch that carries the travel documents should be _____.

A. Attached to the kennel
B. Given to the owner to carry on the plane
C. A bright color that is easily recognizable

Answer: A. All travel documents should be enclosed in a plastic pouch and securely attached to the kennel.

More Information

- Pet Travel Resources on Government, Association, and Airline Websites

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