



S P E C I A L R E P O R T

How safe are the skies for your animal companion?

With the holiday season approaching, many of you are making arrangements to visit family and friends. Some of you may be considering taking your dog or cat along. If your travel plans include flying your animal, you may want to think again.

For your companion animal, flying on an airplane can in fact be quite dangerous. In May of 1992, for example, fifty-six puppies died after becoming ill in the cargo hold of a TWA flight. Dr. Dennis Cloud, a veterinarian called by airline officials, speculated that lack of oxygen may have led to the deaths. "Some of the puppies had pushed their faces through the bars (of their carriers), and others had tried so hard to bite through the bars that their teeth were embedded in the cages," Dr. Cloud said. "We had to pry open their jaws to get them out." The people in his veterinary office were crying as they pulled the puppies out of their carriers, he said. TWA, on the other hand, maintains that there was sufficient oxygen aboard the cargo hold.

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Millions of animals fly every year on airplanes. Although many fly safely, the vast majority are placed in cargo holds that place them at risk of exposure, overheating, and suffocation. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the government agency responsible for protecting animals on airplanes, states that with few exceptions, there is limited temperature control and very little ventilation in these luggage compartments. Moreover, one airline pilot stated that, even with temperature control, these are often imprecise. Crew members, he said, "rely on passenger complaints" to gauge the temperature in the passenger section. In the belly, where temperature control is even more imprecise, there is no one to hear the animals complain.

According to Dr. Hanneman, a veterinarian for the Federal Aviation Administration, "instances of animals dying or being permanently harmed in shipment by air are not unusual." Since there are no reporting requirements, neither the airlines nor federal officials know how many animals die, are injured, or are lost during airplane trips each year. Despite seemingly

stringent regulations to protect the animals, enforcement is very lax. According to the USDA, inspections are only conducted "at major airports as resources allow." Yet despite this, the USDA reports the "virtually every major airline has been cited and fined for repeatedly mishandling animals." Indeed, injuries or deaths of animals have been reported on virtually every major airline.

Delta Air Lines, for example, was recently fined after 32 puppies died and numerous other animals, both cats and dogs, were injured when they "were placed in cargo space that did not have a supply of air sufficient for normal breathing," according to the USDA. The animals suffered from oxygen deprivation.

Although airlines will always publicly say that animals are not just another piece of luggage, animals are not only placed in the luggage compartment, but a Federal Judge recently ruled that animals on airplanes are considered luggage. The lawsuit was filed by a young man whose dog, Floyd, died after being injured on an American Airlines flight. The airplane was delayed for over an hour in hot weather. Court records show that by the time American Airlines took Floyd out of the cargo hold, he was lying on his side panting, his face and paws were bloody, there was blood all over the crate, and the condition of the cage evidenced a panicked effort to escape. Floyd had apparently suffered heat stroke and brain damage. He was euthanized the next morning.

While heat prostration and suffocation may be the greatest killers, other factors can also be dangerous. "Because an animal does not die or show outward signs of illness," Dr. Hanneman states, "does not mean it is in the best of health. Just because an animal is able to tolerate such conditions as temperature, humidity, varying carbon dioxide levels, noise, confinement, reduced air flow (air changes) and total darkness rather than light does not mean the animal is being treated humanely or safely."

Although probably not intentional, what is equally disturbing is that airlines may be giving people misleading information. Often the airline will say that the cargo hold is temperature

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controlled and ventilated, but this may not be totally accurate. Some cargo holds have limited heating capabilities but cannot be cooled. Often, little to no supplemental air is supplied. In addition, the major airlines polled stated that they had never lost a pet or had one die on their airplanes—something that is clearly not true.

Animals are biologically highly sensitive and thus poorly equipped to travel. Moreover, air transportation can be extremely stressful, even to a healthy animal. And although many animals travel on airplanes every year without any problems, it is important to take great care. In some cases, however, even the best laid plans may not be enough.

What you can do:

- If you plan to be gone for a holiday, the best thing you can do is to leave your animal at home and arrange for a sitter to come everyday to feed and socialize with him or her. Although you will both miss each other, he or she will be happier and safer at home.
- If you cannot leave the animal in your home, take him or her to a friend's or neighbor's home where he or she can be watched and cared for.
- If you must bring your dog or cat with you, try to make alternative travel arrangements (although if you travel by car, you must never leave your animals in the car, especially in direct sunlight or with the windows fully closed).
- If you must fly with your companion animal, some airlines will allow you to take a small dog or cat in a carrier in the passenger compartment with you if he or she fits under the seat. Because this is extremely limited, call the airline far in advance and make the necessary arrangements.
- If you must travel by plane and you cannot arrange to bring the animal on board with you, fly non-stop. Many tragedies occur during layovers (even if you are not changing planes). The United States Department of Agriculture, Office of Transportation (USDA OT) states that animals placed inside a cargo hold are at their greatest risk for injury and/or fatality during extended layovers in hot weather. USDA OT also reported that the combination of heat and humidity has been incriminated more times than any other variables in animal injury in airline transport. If the airplane is delayed in hot weather with your animal in the cargo hold, you should insist that he or she be taken out until the airplane is ready to depart.
- Avoid flying during temperature extremes. If you cannot avoid flying on hot days, fly early in the morning or late at night. Moreover, have the crew notify you when your animal has been loaded and unloaded. It may also be a good idea to let the pilot know that your animal is on board (it doesn't hurt to show him or her a picture). In one case, a pilot made an emergency landing because he knew a dog was on board.