

Leaving your dog for the holidays is a mix of relief and anxiety. Relief because travel plans finally make sense, anxiety because dogs are family and the thought of handing them to someone else pulls at you. Done well, boarding turns into a safe, even fun, respite for your dog. Done poorly, it becomes a frantic scramble for vaccinations, missed medication, and a dog who is stressed when you return. This guide walks through the practical choices, timelines, and judgment calls that separate a calm boarding experience from one you will regret.

Why planning matters The holiday period compresses demand. Kennels and dog daycare facilities run full weeks in advance. Staff are stretched, routines are more rigid, and swapping shifts to cover absentee needs can create gaps in care unless you plan. Beyond availability, good planning reduces stress for your dog. Dogs respond to predictability. A consistent drop-off routine, an initial trial visit, and clear medication instructions mean fewer behavioral problems, less vocalizing, and a smoother re-acclimation when you get home.

Decide what kind of placement fits your dog Not every dog benefits from the same setting. Think about temperament, health, and past experience.

- Dogs that thrive on social interaction and supervised play often do well at dog daycare and facilities that offer group play. These environments provide structured activity and socialization during the day, with overnight suites or consolidated sleeping areas.
- Dogs that prefer quiet or are reactive toward other dogs will usually do better in boarding situations that offer private runs or home-style boarding where they are isolated from group play. Some kennels provide one-on-one time, but check staffing ratios and whether that time is scheduled or ad hoc.
- Senior dogs, dogs with chronic conditions, or those on multiple medications require a facility comfortable with veterinary protocols and willing to manage administration precisely. Ask about staff training and access to on-call vets.
- Puppies need careful handling around vaccinations and exposure. Many daycare and dog boarding facilities accept puppies only after their series of vaccinations is complete, and they often require a specific schedule to minimize disease risk.

A realistic timeline and what to book when Book your boarding reservation as soon as holiday plans are fixed. For major holidays, aim for at least four to six weeks out. Smaller facilities and preferred kennels may require even earlier reservations.

Six weeks before travel: secure the spot. Ask about cancellation policies and whether you can change dates without penalties, because travel changes happen.

Three weeks before travel: schedule a meet-and-greet. Many facilities require it. Bring your dog for a short session so staff can observe behavior, check for separation anxiety, and recommend the best placement. A short visit also lets your dog meet the space without the stress of a full stay.

One week before travel: confirm paperwork. Most facilities require proof of vaccinations, a signed waiver, emergency contact information, and a current medication log. Some ask for recent fecal test results if the dog will enter group play areas.

Two to three days before travel: prepare the packing list and run a trial with any new routines you will ask of your dog, such as crate sleeping or being separated in a quiet room.

What to bring and what to leave at home Packing for your dog is a two-part exercise: items that help your dog transition and items that protect you if something is damaged or lost.

Bring clearly labeled food in measured portions, replaced into daily servings to avoid overfeeding mistakes. Include medication in labeled containers with explicit administration instructions. Bring a familiar item that smells like home, such as an unwashed T-shirt, to comfort dogs who rely on scent. A sturdy collar with ID tags and a backup microchip number written on the paperwork is essential.

Leave at home: sentimental toys that cannot be replaced [doggy daycare pflugerville](#) or items with loose parts that could be swallowed. Avoid squeaky toys unless you know the facility allows them; they can trigger stress or conflict in group play settings.

A short checklist to prepare your dog before drop-off

- visit the facility for a meet-and-greet, ideally during busy hours so your dog sees normal activity
- update vaccinations and obtain a written record to bring, including rabies, distemper, bordetella if required, and a recent fecal test if asked
- practice crate time and short separations at home to reduce panic during boarding
- create a medication sheet with dosing times, handling instructions, and a secondary phone contact
- label all items and pre-portion food into single-serving bags to simplify feeding for staff

Vet and health paperwork, what facilities typically require Most reputable kennels request proof of vaccination. Rabies is nearly always mandatory. Distemper/parvovirus combinations, bordetella (kennel cough), and leptospirosis can be required depending on regional disease prevalence. Facilities that run group play will often insist on all of the above plus a recent negative fecal test. Ask whether they accept digital vaccination records or require printed copies. If your dog receives flea and tick prevention, bring documentation showing frequency of use, especially if you travel to regions where ticks are common.

Medication protocols and practical tips How a facility handles medication differentiates competent operations from casual ones. Ask whether staff administers oral meds, injections, or topical treatments, and whether there is an extra fee for medication administration. Provide written instructions carried with the medication for each dosing period. If your dog takes multiple pills, consider organizing them into a daily pill box labeled with dates and times. For pills administered at fixed times, give the facility a margin of tolerance, such as plus or minus 30 minutes, rather than rigid second-by-second expectations.

If your dog relies on timed insulin, ensure the facility has staff trained in handling and administering insulin and that they will call your veterinarian if blood glucose patterns are concerning. Bring extra supplies, including syringes and spare insulin vials, stored according to manufacturer recommendations.

Behavioral preparation and managing separation anxiety Separation anxiety is not rare. If your dog has displayed destructive behavior, excessive vocalizing, or panic during past separations, disclose this frankly to the facility. Facilities can often accommodate by providing more frequent enrichment, one-on-one time, or calming aids. For severe anxiety, work with a trainer or veterinarian before travel. Short desensitization sessions that simulate the boarding experience—leaving for gradually increasing intervals—help considerably.

Medication or supplements for anxiety should be discussed with your veterinarian well before departure. Some medications need time to reach therapeutic levels, and their effects on interaction and appetite vary. If you opt for a pheromone collar or a calming supplement, bring your dog's own familiar brand, because swapping brands mid-stay can cause unexpected changes.

Evaluating facilities: questions that matter Choosing a boarding facility requires more than glossy photos. Come prepared with specific questions and observe the premises during a visit: do staff make eye contact with dogs, are runs cleaned visibly, and is noise controlled? Below are five pointed questions to ask staff before committing.

- what is the staff to dog ratio during day and night shifts, and are employees trained in pet first aid
- how do you separate dogs by size, play style, and temperament to prevent mismatches
- what is your protocol for medical emergencies, including veterinary transport and costs
- how do you handle dogs with dietary restrictions or multiple medications, and will you follow my written schedule precisely
- can i visit my dog during the stay, and what are the drop-off and pick-up windows

Rescue dogs and special-case histories Rescue dogs often bring more complexity. Unknown medical histories, previous trauma, or limited exposure to other dogs can present risks in group play. A facility experienced with shelters or behavioral modification is preferable. For a dog with a bite history or severe reactivity, look for providers that offer private runs, one-on-one walks, and staff trained in low-stress handling. Expect higher fees for specialized care; these are not optional extras but necessary investments when managing risk.

Anecdote from years of boarding dogs One winter I boarded a seven-year-old Labrador for a client who travels frequently. She had never stayed overnight away from her family except for veterinary boarding. The first stay was a short trial day and the meet-and-greet was critical. Staff noted she froze in the lobby and refused treats when presented by a stranger, which led us to put her in a quiet suite with a partially closed door and extra bedding. During the four-day holiday stay, staff sent two short videos each day rather than one long call, showing the dog eating, napping, and getting a short walk. When the owner returned, the lab was relaxed and tail-wagging. That first trial day saved weeks of stress and set expectations correctly.

Handling pick-up, re-entry, and post-stay adjustment Plan for a quiet re-entry. The first 24 to 48 hours back home should be low-key. Maintain the feeding schedule you used during boarding for at least a day to prevent stomach upset. Reintroduce exercise gradually, especially if your dog had high activity during boarding. Puppies and senior dogs are particularly sensitive; a long walk the first evening can be overstimulating or compressive on joints, respectively. Observe appetite, stool quality, and behavior. If you see lethargy, diarrhea, vomiting, or dramatic changes in behavior, contact your veterinarian.

Pricing and value trade-offs Price ranges vary widely by region and by the level of care provided. For basic kennel boarding, expect modest rates. Premium facilities that include activities, live webcams, and medical oversight cost more. Value is not only the daily rate; factor in travel time, how the facility handles late pick-ups, emergency procedures, and the transparency of staff communication. A slightly higher daily rate can be economical if it reduces the risk of emergency vet visits or guarantees a staff member trained in senior dog care.

When boarding goes wrong: common problems and fixes Common issues include missed medications, escape artists, and illness introduced by other dogs. Prevent missed medications by labeling and providing instructions with redundancy. Prevent escapes by ensuring collars and harnesses are quality and fit correctly, and by verifying that kennels have secure latches. For illnesses, ask about isolation protocols and whether the facility will notify your veterinarian at the first sign. If you receive a photo of your dog looking listless or a report of diarrhea, treat it seriously and ask for detailed observations, not just reassurances. Quick action is cheaper and kinder than delayed responses.

Choosing between dog daycare, home boarding, and traditional kennels Each model has advantages. Dog daycare is ideal for dogs that need daytime activity and socialization and often offers discounted overnight rates if added on. Doggy daycare with overnight boarding can reduce separation stress because the dog is used to the environment. Home boarding gives a quieter, family-style experience but varies tremendously in reliability depending on the sitter. Traditional kennels tend to be the most structured and consistent for dogs who do well with routine and separation.

Make the choice based on your dog's tolerance for other dogs, need for medical oversight, and your comfort with the facility's policies. Always ask for references, and if possible, join a tour during peak hours to see real operations, not staged showrooms.

Final practical reminders Pack an extra bag of food and a note of contact information inside the dog's crate or bag. Confirm the facility's holiday hours and whether they charge for extended stays if flights change. Keep the veterinarian's phone number and medication records handy, and provide a local emergency contact in case you are unreachable while traveling.

A successful boarding experience balances logistics, honesty about your dog's needs, and thoughtful preparation. The effort you put into visiting, documenting, and communicating typically pays back in calmer dogs, fewer surprises, and the ability to travel without worry.