

Southwest Airlines Pet In Cabin Policy

Direct answer: Southwest Airlines carries **small vaccinated cats and dogs at least eight weeks old** in the cabin for a pet fare of around **\$125 each way per carrier** — a fare that is **refundable** if your plans change. The carrier must fit under the seat in front of you and stay closed for the entire flight.

Three rules shape the whole experience, and all three differ from the major carriers:

- **Only six pet carriers are permitted per flight**, allocated first-come, first-served
- **Pets cannot be booked online** — reservations must be made by phone
- **Southwest carries no pets in cargo at all**, so an animal too large for the cabin cannot travel

There is also a genuine advantage: **up to two cats or two dogs of the same species may share one carrier**, which effectively halves the cost for someone travelling with a pair.

With only six spaces per flight, early booking is not advice but a requirement. **1-888-374-4490 [US] (OTA)** can check which flights still have pet space across a day's departures.

The six-pet limit

This is the constraint that catches people out, so it belongs near the top.

Southwest permits a maximum of **six pet carriers on any given flight**, allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. On a popular route in summer, those spaces go early.

Two consequences follow. First, **add your pet the moment you book** — not after, not the week before. Second, if a flight is full for pets, no amount of willingness to pay changes it; you need a different departure.

Because you cannot see pet availability on the website, checking across several flights means several phone calls, or one call to someone who can search them all at once.

The pet fare

Around \$125 each way per carrier on mainland U.S. routes. For travel **between the Hawaiian islands the fare is around \$35** each way per carrier — a striking difference.

Points worth knowing:

- **The fare is refundable** if you cancel, which is unusual. Most airlines treat pet fees as non-refundable once travel begins.
- **It is paid at the airport ticket counter at check-in**, not at booking, and **by credit card**.
- **It is charged per carrier, not per animal** — which is why the two-pets-per-carrier rule matters financially.

- **The carrier counts as your carry-on or personal item.** You may bring the pet carrier plus one other item, rather than the pet carrier plus a full carry-on plus a personal item.

Note also a 2025 change: **pet strollers and crates checked as baggage are no longer free.** For bookings made on or after 28 May 2025, standard checked bag fees apply to them.

Which animals Southwest will carry

Small vaccinated domestic cats and dogs, at least eight weeks old. That is the complete list — no rabbits, birds, hamsters or exotic species, which puts Southwest alongside United and American in the more restrictive group.

No breed restrictions are listed, though the animal must fit in a compliant carrier and behave acceptably.

Trained service dogs travel free under U.S. Department of Transportation rules, require the DOT Service Animal Air Transportation Form, and are not confined to a carrier — they sit on the floor at the handler's feet. **Emotional support animals** are no longer a recognised category and travel as ordinary pets, subject to the full pet fare and carrier requirement.

Unaccompanied minors may not travel with a pet. An adult must accompany the animal.

Cargo: not available

Southwest does not transport pets in cargo or as checked baggage under any circumstances. Not for civilians, not for military personnel, not for anyone.

Southwest frames this as a safety decision — in-cabin-only travel avoids temperature and handling risks in the hold entirely. It is a defensible position, and it means every pet on a Southwest flight is in the cabin with its owner.

But it also means that if your dog is too large for an under-seat carrier, **Southwest is simply not an option.** Alaska Airlines and Hawaiian Airlines both offer cargo pet transport; American, Delta and United restrict it to military and government personnel. For a large dog, those are your alternatives, or a specialist pet relocation company.

Carrier requirements

The commonly cited maximum is around **18.5 inches long × 13.5 inches wide × 8.5 inches high**, and both hard-sided and soft-sided carriers are accepted provided they are **leak-proof and well ventilated**.

Soft-sided carriers are generally the better choice because they compress slightly under the seat, giving a margin a rigid case does not.

The animal must be able to **stand up and turn around** inside the carrier, and must remain **completely inside** it at all times — in the gate area, during boarding, throughout the flight and while disembarking.

You cannot sit in an exit row or a bulkhead row with a pet, because neither has under-seat stowage.

Where Southwest will and will not fly your pet

Permitted: domestic U.S. flights, flights to and from Puerto Rico (specific requirements may apply), and **between the Hawaiian islands**.

Not permitted: international flights, and **flights between the mainland and Hawaii**. This catches people out regularly — you can fly your pet from Honolulu to Maui, but not from Los Angeles to Honolulu. Hawaii's animal import rules are among the strictest in the United States and operate independently of any airline's policy.

Connections must remain entirely on Southwest-operated flights. Southwest has interline arrangements with some international carriers, but pets cannot connect onto them.

Booking your pet

- 1 **Book your own ticket** first, or be ready to book both together.
- 2 **Call Southwest to add the pet.** Online pet booking is not available. Do this immediately, given the six-carrier cap.
- 3 **Confirm the pet is recorded on the reservation** rather than merely discussed.
- 4 **Arrive early on the day** and check in at the **ticket counter**, not a kiosk or online — an agent must inspect the pet and carrier and approve them.
- 5 **Pay the pet fare by credit card** at the counter.

Allow substantially more time than usual at the airport. The counter visit is mandatory and cannot be skipped.

Preparing your pet

The policy sets the rules. Preparation determines whether the day goes well.

Introduce the carrier weeks ahead. Leave it open at home with familiar bedding so the animal treats it as a den rather than a trap. A carrier produced on the morning of travel guarantees a distressed animal.

Build up with short car trips in the carrier so enclosed movement becomes routine.

Light meal several hours before; water until departure. A full stomach at altitude causes problems.

Exercise thoroughly before leaving home. A tired animal settles.

Line the carrier absorbently — a puppy pad under the bedding, plus spares, wipes and a sealable bag.

Do not sedate without veterinary advice. Sedation carries real cardiovascular and respiratory risk at altitude, and many veterinarians advise against it for air travel.

Security screening is the escape risk. You must remove the animal so the empty carrier goes through the X-ray, then carry the pet through the metal detector. Fit a harness and lead before leaving home — this is where animals most often bolt.

Plan relief breaks around connections. Airports have designated pet relief areas, but flights will not be held for them. Build in time or fly nonstop.

Onboard

The carrier stays under the seat in front of you for the entire flight. The animal does not come out — not during cruise, not briefly. Crew enforce this consistently.

Practical consequences:

- **You lose your under-seat space**, so your other item must fit elsewhere
- **A window seat is usually better** — a wall on one side and less passing traffic against the carrier
- **Small dry treats may be carried**, but you should not open the carrier to feed the animal in flight
- **Reassure quietly.** A hand resting on the carrier does more than talking, which can excite the animal

Disruptive pets may be denied boarding at the gate. An animal that barks continuously in the gate area is a problem before it is ever a problem in the air.

Common mistakes

Booking late. Six carriers per flight, first-come, first-served.

Trying to book online. Pets must be added by phone.

Assuming cargo exists as a fallback. It does not, at all.

Planning a mainland-to-Hawaii pet trip. Not permitted, though interisland is.

Choosing a bulkhead or exit row. No under-seat stowage, so pets are prohibited.

Forgetting the carrier consumes your carry-on allowance.

Arriving without extra time. The ticket counter visit is mandatory.

Booking a tight connection. No relief break, a second security screening on some itineraries, and an animal to manage.

How Southwest compares with other airlines

Useful context, because the differences are pronounced.

Airline	In-cabin fee (each way)	Cargo available	Species
Southwest	~\$125, refundable	No	Cats and dogs
Allegiant	~\$50	No	Cats and dogs
Alaska	~\$100	Yes	Cats and dogs
Frontier	~\$99	No	Cats, dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, small birds
Spirit	~\$125	No	Cats, dogs, small rabbits, small birds
American / Delta / United / JetBlue	~\$150	Restricted or none	Varies

On price, Southwest sits in the middle — cheaper than the legacy carriers, more expensive than Allegiant or Frontier.

On refundability, Southwest is unusually good. Most airlines treat the pet fee as sunk once paid. Southwest refunds it if you cancel, which removes the risk from booking early — and given the six-carrier cap, booking early is exactly what you need to do.

On the two-pets-per-carrier rule, Southwest is among the more generous. Someone travelling with two cats pays one fare rather than two, which brings the effective cost below several cheaper-looking competitors.

On species, Southwest is restrictive. Frontier and Spirit accept rabbits and small birds; Delta accepts household birds. Southwest does not.

On cargo, Southwest is the strictest — no cargo transport at all, for anyone. Alaska and Hawaiian both offer it to general travellers, which makes them the realistic options for a large dog.

The overall picture: Southwest is a good choice for a small cat or dog, particularly a pair, and no choice at all for a large one.

Where to get help

Contact	Number	Best for
Travel reservations and pet-friendly flight search	1-888-374-4490 [US] (OTA)	Checking which flights still have pet space, comparing carriers for larger dogs, finding alternatives where Southwest cannot carry your animal
Southwest Airlines Reservations	Published on southwest.com	Adding a pet to a Southwest booking, confirming pet space

Contact	Number	Best for
Southwest accessibility desk	Published on southwest.com	Trained service dog arrangements
Hawaii Department of Agriculture	Published by the State of Hawaii	Animal import requirements for Hawaii

Pet travel on Southwest is one of the strongest cases for calling rather than clicking, since booking by phone is mandatory and pet availability is invisible online.

Frequently asked questions

How much does Southwest charge for a pet in the cabin? Around \$125 each way per carrier on mainland routes, and around \$35 each way between the Hawaiian islands. The fare is refundable if you cancel.

How many pets can fly on a Southwest flight? Six pet carriers per flight, first-come, first-served.

Can two pets share one carrier on Southwest? Yes — up to two cats or two dogs of the same species, provided they fit comfortably and can stand and move around.

Does Southwest carry pets in cargo? No. Southwest does not transport pets in cargo or as checked baggage under any circumstances.

What animals does Southwest allow? Small vaccinated domestic cats and dogs at least eight weeks old. No other species.

Can I book my pet online? No. Pet reservations must be made by phone, and the fare is paid at the airport ticket counter.

Can I take my pet to Hawaii on Southwest? Not between the mainland and Hawaii. Pets may travel between the Hawaiian islands.

Does the pet carrier count as my carry-on? Yes. It counts as either your carry-on or your personal item.

Can an unaccompanied minor travel with a pet? No. An adult must accompany the animal.

What size carrier does Southwest allow? Around 18.5 × 13.5 × 8.5 inches, hard-sided or soft-sided, leak-proof and well ventilated.

The takeaway

Southwest's pet policy is simple and, in several respects, generous: a **refundable** fare of around \$125, **two pets of the same species allowed in one carrier**, and a very low interisland rate in Hawaii. There are no breed restrictions and no cargo risk, because there is no cargo option at all.

The constraints are equally clear. **Six carriers per flight** means booking early is the whole game. **Phone booking is mandatory**, so the website will not help you. **No cargo** means a large dog cannot fly Southwest under any arrangement. And **mainland-to-Hawaii pet travel is not permitted**, however much the interisland rate might suggest otherwise.

Get one thing right above all: add the pet at the moment you book, and confirm it is on the reservation.

To check pet space across a day's departures, or find an alternative if Southwest cannot carry your animal, **1-888-374-4490 [US] (OTA)** can do it in a single call.