



For Active Dogs!

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Coaching dog enthusiasts to embrace the unique needs of active dogs through teaching, mentoring and educational media

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My Dog in Rehab Needs Stuff to Do



Ok, your canine buddy is on the team's injured/reserved list. It's only temporary, but it's driving you and your teammate nuts! Your dog's brain is used to being active – running, playing, wrestling with his dog friends, and spending time training and competing with you in whatever games you play. **That brain thrives on stimulation!**

But now the veterinarian says you have to restrict their activity. Phrases like “crate rest,” “potty on leash only,” and “no running or jumping” make you think that the next few weeks or months are going to be unbearable for

both you and your active dog. You know that you have to comply so that your dog can heal completely and get back to all the games they love, but that's easier said than done.

Well, there's great news! There are a lot of things that you can do with a dog on restricted activity, and they might actually end up expanding, rather than contracting, your dog's repertoire of activities. Since dogs are highly intelligent beings, you can use this time to exercise their brains. You can also focus on exercises for the parts of their bodies that are not in rehab.

Crate Rest

Let's deal with the 900-pound gorilla in the room first. Your veterinarian might have recommended crate rest, but long term crate rest causes significant muscle atrophy (1). A day or two of strict crate rest after surgery might be necessary until your dog's body is cleared of anesthetic from the surgery and the initial post-surgical pain is under control. However, longer term significant confinement is needed for some conditions. So clarify with your veterinarian what, exactly, they mean by crate rest, and ask about some of the options discussed below.

Since avoiding certain activities is still very important, there are alternatives that can keep your dog safely confined but still able to move around a little, change position and lie in various positions without overexertion. An exercise pen consisting of six or eight wire or plastic panels of an appropriate height (18 to 48 inches) clipped together and arranged in a circle is an ideal way to give your dog just a little more room. You can start by arranging the panels in a way that gives your dog just a bit more room than a crate, and gradually increase the available area during the rehabilitation process. If your dog tries to climb or jump out of the pen, you can purchase or engineer a cover for the pen, which will keep all but the most insistent canine Houdinis inside. If you place the pen in a well-frequented location, add favorite chew toys and a soft bed, and throw food treats into the pen to reward your dog for settling down, it won't be long before your dog is thinking that this new living room fort is a pretty cool place to be.

Potting On Leash

Don't just clip on a 6-foot leash, go outside to the nearest grass, get the business done and go back inside. The outdoors offers a great deal of stimulation for all of your dog's senses. There are other dogs, people, food, trash, and other sights and scents much more interesting to dogs than to us out there in the world. There is also the sun, the rain, the breezes – so much to enjoy. Let your dog experience these things while safely on leash.

So make potty time a positive experience. Sure, you should have your dog on an appropriate-length leash, but depending on your dog and the stage of rehabilitation, you can gradually increase its length. Take your dog to the most scent-worthy places in your yard and let him or her just settle down or even wander around, taking the environment in. If it's okay with your vet, maybe a roll in the freshly mowed grass is called for. Who cares about a few grass stains when considering the big picture of your dog's emotional health?

Exercising Your Dog's Brain

Have you ever taken a class in which you struggled so hard to figure something out that afterwards you felt so mentally exhausted that you need a nap? For me, it would be physics. Well, dogs experience the same thing; mental exercise gives you a lot more bang for your buck than physical exercise when it comes to tiring your dog out. Here are several games that will help your dog sleep soundly. I bet you can think of others as well!

1. Puzzle Games

There are dozens of games on the market that are designed so that your dog has to solve a puzzle to get a piece of food. Some are very simple toys that require that your dog move the toy into a certain position before the food will drop out. Others require your dog to initiate a series of complex moves such as moving sliders and opening drawers before the food is presented. Experiment with them, starting with the simpler ones, and seeing how far your brilliant dog can advance. You may need to make them easy at first to help your dog stay motivated, but over time you can up the ante as his skills and problem solving improve.

2. Food Activities

Give your dog a marrow bone with a little meat still on the outside. That can make a dog happy for an hour or more, chewing all the gristle off the outside and digging out the marrow. If your dog is not used to fresh, fatty foods, you might limit his or her time with the bone initially to be sure that your dog's gastrointestinal tract is up to the task. Keep in mind that there is a risk of tooth fracture when dogs chew hard objects such as bones, so another option is a bully stick or other edible rawhide. To reduce any choking risk, all chews should only be given while supervised and removed safely when they are small enough that your dog could swallow them.

You can also fill a Kong™ or other similar toy with your dog's food, sealing it with xylitol-free peanut butter or yogurt. Freezing this treat will make it last even longer. There are dozens of good recipes for fillings on the web, as well as websites that have suggestions for homemade food-dispensing toys.

Teach your dog to catch food. This usually requires minimal movement by your dog if you start by tossing the food from a very short distance and gradually move farther away. Use foods of different weights, e.g., kibble vs. popcorn, so that your dog learns to really track the food, regardless of its speed.

3. Scent Games

These can be played inside and outside, giving your dog lots of different experiences.

a. *Find the Cookie!* Hide some (preferably smelly) food treats in your house. Start in a small room to begin with but expand the area as your dog gets better and is able to move around more. Initially just place the treats in obvious locations on the floor. As your dog's scenting skills sharpen, start putting them under sofa cushions, in corners where there are heating/cooling registers that swirl the scent around, and under a crumpled blanket so that your dog needs to dig for that buried treasure. One warning, though, don't hide treats on counters or kitchen tables so you don't teach your dog to counter surf!

b. *The Shell Game.* Hide a very smelly treat under one of three plastic containers and encourage your dog to identify its location. Then gradually start using foods with less scent. Hint: High fat, high protein foods have more odor than high carbohydrate foods.

Remember to watch your dog's weight while using these games. If possible, use food that is part of your dog's daily ration. Or use foods with higher levels of proteins and fats, such as microwaved hot dog, bacon or other meat slices, rather than store-bought treats that are often high in carbohydrates. If your dog is at risk for gaining weight, use low/no calorie treats like baby carrots or apples, in addition to the more delicious ones. You can place the low calorie treats into a baggie with some fatty treats and shake them around to coat the lower value treats with scent to increase their appeal.

4. Train Some Tricks.

There are lots of tricks that involve minimal movement by your dog. All of these require a little understanding of reward-based learning. Essentially, figure out a way to get your dog to do the desired behavior (this might require several steps to progressively approximate the final action), and the instant your dog performs the desired behavior either click or praise, and give a treat. Don't add the verbal cue until your dog is performing the final behavior. The best games are ones that play off something your dog already loves to do. So watch your dog and turn his joy into tricks!

Here are a few examples of easy tricks, but I know you can think of lots more!

a. *Stick Out Your Tongue.* You can teach your dog to stick out its tongue by holding a treat in front of their nose and clicking or praising as soon as their tongue comes out to lick the treat. Another way to get a dog to stick its tongue out is to blow in its face. Once your dog is regularly sticking its tongue out, add a verbal cue like, "What do you think of rehab?"



b. *Hug Something.* Teach your dog to touch a small, approximately 1-inch diameter piece of paper attached to a wooden spoon by praising and treating as his face gets gradually closer to the spoon. Make sure your dog touches the paper, not the spoon. Then transfer the paper to your cheek, so that your dog snuggles his nose up against you.

c. *Put Away Your Toys.* Hasn't everyone wished that their dogs would put away their toys? This one is easy – just teach your dog to pick up whatever you point at and put it in a box. Eventually, when you put a cue on this behavior, your dog will begin to put away its toys without you needing to point at them.

d. *Help Around the House.* As your dog is able to do more, you can teach them a variety of useful tricks such as finding the TV remote, how to bump cabinets closed, and to open or close the refrigerator. Just make sure they can't open it when you're not around or your grocery bill may increase exponentially, along with your dog's waistline!

e. *Name That Toy.* First teach your dog to pick up a toy when you give it a name. As a reward, you play with that toy together. Then add another toy and give it another name. When your dog picks up that one in response to its name, you play with that one. Then try alternating names so that your dog gets to play when they choose the correct toy. Add more toys ad infinitum.

f. *Sports Shorts.* There are lots of components of your favorite sports that don't require a lot of movement. Many of the Rally moves and the obedience scent discrimination exercise are appropriate for dogs in the mid to later stages of rehab. For agility dogs, you can teach right and left turns, come to your left and right sides, and other ground work that doesn't involve running.

Exercise Your Dog's Body

When your dog's injury is localized to one area of the body, there's no reason not to keep the other parts of the body fit. That will help your dog recover from the injury more quickly and will help prevent compensatory injuries.

1. Grow a Few Muscles

If your dog has injured its elbow, no one says that it can't safely perform some exercises to strengthen the rear legs. Conversely, if your dog has a hip injury, there's no reason not to build those shoulder muscles. There are many different ways to safely strengthen a dog's muscles without having to spend long hours trotting up and down a road. The best strengthening exercises have the following characteristics: they are non-impact, they are targeted to specific areas of the body, and they involve working to overload. That's great news, because it means that most of these exercises can be performed in the comfort of your own living room.

For dogs with front limb injuries, you can improve their core by teaching them to sit up on their haunches (yes, studies show this is completely safe), or have them move from a sit to a stand and back to a sit repeatedly without moving the front feet. You can strengthen the rear by having them step on a plastic container lid with

their rear feet.

For dogs with rear limb injuries, why not teach them to wave with their paw higher than their head, or give you a high-9 (like a high-5) but placing the paw in any of 9 different positions in front of the body. Videos of how to train all of these exercises and many more can be purchased to view on any of your devices here:

<https://www.avidogzink.com/shop/dog-exercise-books-posters-videos/dog-exercise-videos/>

2. Make Walks More Fun

Going for a walk with your dog shouldn't be like going on the Bataan Death March. Most rehabilitation professionals prescribe gradually increasing lengths of walks. Clients who are serious about their dogs' rehabilitation often take their dogs out day after day for walks along the sidewalk or streets in their neighborhood, checking to make sure that they have spent the prescribed amount of time on the walk. In addition, since walking in the same places day after day can be boring, they often just stick in those earphones and listen to music, podcasts or books on tape, paying little attention to their canine companion.

Even at the best of times, walks are not a particularly good form of exercise for most dogs. They are usually relatively high-impact, they do not target the particular part of the body that needs the exercise, and it's really hard to know when your dog has had too much or not enough.



I suggest that you view going for a walk as a Good-for-the-Soul exercise. Not just your dog's soul, but yours, too. Here's what to do. Put your dog on a long line (20 to 50 feet). Think of a place where you can go that is new and preferably in the middle of nature. A park, or a path in the woods, or a public garden where on-leash dogs are allowed are great places. But even your and possibly your neighbors' yards will do in a pinch. Take your dog out and let him or her sniff and pee, and poop, and sniff some more to their heart's content. Don't rush it. Don't time it. Just be. And while you're at it, breathe. Deeply. Be present and enjoy where you are,

spending quality time with that amazing creature that you love and are helping to heal.

As you can see, rather than a period of rehabilitation being a time of reduced activity, with a little imagination, you can make this a time that is filled with new activities and a renewed relationship as you work with your dog one-on-one with new and renewing experiences.

Reference

1. Sneddon, JC, Minnaar, PP, Grosskopf, JF, & Groeneveld, HT. Physiological and blood biochemical responses to submaximal treadmill exercise in Canaan dogs before, during and after training. *J S Afr Vet Assoc* 1989;60:87–

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