





We understand that the post-operative recovery phase can be stressful for both you and your pet and that walks and exercise are usually a hugely important part of both of your days.

We have put together the information below as alternatives to physical exercise, whilst your pet is in this important recovery phase where exercise restriction is necessary to aid recovery. The information and ideas below are designed to provide mental stimulation for your pet, to relieve anxiety and boredom during this phase and hopefully have a positive and calming effect on your pet. These exercises are often actually much more tiring and satisfying than just physical exercise!

This recovery period can also be a great time to start going back to basics with your pet's training or used to teach new tricks. It is also a great time to try desensitisation to things such as being examined (looking into ears, at paws, all over body touch). These activities can help to develop and improve our bond with our dogs, which helps them become more focussed and responsive to us, and less worried about what might be going on in the environment around them.

If your pet is still really struggling during this period, please do let us know so we can discuss the use of medication to assist if suitable and indicated.

The type of treats you use will depend on your pet. You will need to consider their dietary requirements, calorie intake, likes and dislikes plus their food motivation. For some dogs, their normal kibble will be sufficient for some or all of the games. Others may require treats of a higher 'value' such as chicken, liver paste, natural yoghurt or commercial dog treats. Some dogs may also be on a recovery diet post-operatively which would be suitable for the below games. You will need to ensure that any additional food is within their daily calorie intake, unless instructed by your veterinary surgeon, so care is taken not to overfeed them during longer periods of recovery time to minimise the risk of weight gain.

****Please remember****

These enrichment items and interactive toys are not intended to be left with your dog whilst they are unattended.

If your dog has any intolerance to the foods listed in this document or has a special diet, please speak to your practice for recommendations on alternatives.

Feeding and activity toys

Instead of simply feeding from a bowl at mealtimes, here are suggestions about how to divide up and feed their daily ration:

Stuffable feeding toys



How to: Fill up the toy with food as per the below list and give this to your dog on a suitable surface in your home or garden. Your dog can then pick up, paw and nose the toy to obtain the treats from inside.

Treats to use: Own kibble, commercial treats, chicken, liver paste, natural yoghurt, recovery foods (both wet and dry variations).

Top tip: Once your pet has the hang of these, mix the kibble with natural yoghurt (or wet recovery food) for a longer lasting level up variation of this game. To really step it up, you can then freeze the toy with this mixture inside to really up the difficulty. If your dog then appears bored or leaves the toy unfinished, you may have worked up the levels too quickly, so retreat back a step for a few days to let them get the hang of it again.



Frozen cups

How to: Using plastic cups/bowls/storage tubs that are large enough for your pet to safely lick (like an ice lolly!) without swallowing, fill the container with treats as per the below list. You can use plain low fat natural yoghurt or water to fill the container and then freeze for a few hours.

Treats to use: Own kibble, commercial treats, chicken, liver paste, natural yoghurt, recovery foods (both wet and dry variations).

Interactive/treat dispensing toys

How to: These toys are a great stuffable toy/frozen cup alternative for older dogs or those with paw injuries so can't hold a stuffable toy to extract the food. Treat dispensing toys can be filled with kibble or treats and given to your dog on a suitable surface.

Treats to use: Your dog's own kibble, recovery kibble, commercial treats or a mixture of them all.

Lick mats

How to: Spread the food across the mat. You can use one or more variations across the mat. Place in front of your dog on a suitable surface.

Treats to use: Recovery food, other wet dog food, natural yoghurt, liver paste.

Top tip: Lick mats can also be frozen to increase the difficulty and duration of this activity. You can also use different shaped bowls and slow feed bowls with ridges or narrow areas to encourage licking and increase duration by licking food out of harder to reach areas. Licking is a really calming and rewarding activity for our dogs!

Snuffle mats

How to: Fill the mats with your chosen treat/kibble. Ensure to ruffle them up so the food is distributed through the mat and hidden so your dog uses their nose to find the food.

Treats to use: Your dog's own kibble, recovery kibble, commercial treats

Top tip: You can make your own snuffle games at home using a cardboard box and old towel/fabric. Simply ruffle up the old towels or bits of fabric in the box and scatter the treats throughout.



Towels and cardboard boxes

How to: Towels can be used as above as well as simply opening out the towel, placing a few treats along the width of the towel and rolling to hide them. Repeat until you have fully rolled the towel with as many layers as you choose and place on a suitable surface for your dog. Cardboard boxes can be filled with treats and obstacles such as screwed up paper, empty bottles and cardboard tubes, and the tops closed for the dog to use their nose to figure out how to access the treats.

Treats to use: Your dog's own kibble, recovery kibble, commercial treats

Top tip: Once your dog has mastered the basic towel roll, you can increase the difficulty by then tying the towel into a loose knot in the middle or at the ends or putting the treats inside a safe food toy, into the towel. You can also fill the cardboard boxes with old toilet roll inserts stood on their ends, which are individually filled with treats and folded into a closure, again increasing the difficulty and duration.



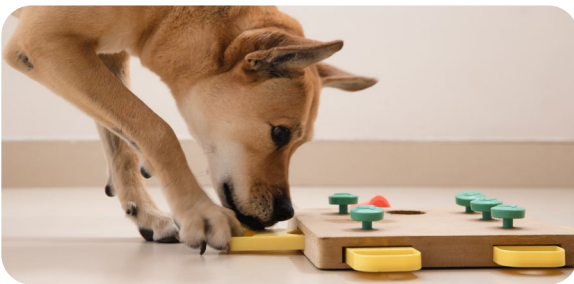
Scatter or seek and find games

How to: Grab a handful of your chosen treat and simply scatter in your garden or on a suitable surface in your home. Grassed areas work perfectly as they better hide the treat meaning your dog really has to use their nose and work harder to find the food! Take care to avoid any toxic leaves such as Oak leaves. Use different surfaces and create trails with a jackpot at the end as a reward for your dog's hard work such as a nice, dog safe chew or dental stick! Avoid stairs and heights, keeping the games low to the ground if your pet is recovering from surgery, and take care to avoid excessive movement if restricted.

Treats to use: Your dog's own kibble, recovery kibble, commercial treats

Top tip: Ask your dog to sit and wait or stay whilst you scatter the treats. You can use this game to teach them a new command of 'find it' whilst also encouraging some impulse control with food. You can also play 'hide and go seek' by asking your dog to wait in another room or away from the food area and then sending them in to find the treats!

Puzzle feeders



How to: You will find lots of variations of puzzle feeders online and in pet stores. Simply fill with your chosen treat as per manufacturer guidance.

Treats to use: This will vary dependant on the type of puzzle feeder you opt for, but most will be suitable including your dog's own kibble, commercial treats, chicken, liver paste, natural yoghurt, recovery foods (both wet and dry variations).

Muffin tin

How to: Grab a muffin tin and fill the holes with treats. Place tennis balls or obstacles on top and place in front of your dog.

Treats to use: Own kibble, commercial treats, chicken, liver paste, natural yoghurt, recovery foods (both wet and dry variations).

Top tip: If your dog is tennis ball mad and on strict rest then this game might not be for them! Or use a less exciting obstacle to hide the treats!

Plastic bottle

How to: Ensure the plastic bottle is empty and safe to use by removing any lids and seals around the bottle neck. Fill with treats and give to your dog to work out how to get the treats out!

Treats to use: Own kibble, commercial treats, recovery kibble.



New cues and activities

Teach them scent work

How to: Get something smelly such as cloves and place them in an airtight container with a bit of cloth or fabric for a few days to absorb the scent. Place the cloth or fabric into a large plastic cup or container (big enough for your dog to get their nose into). Don't force your dog's nose into the container, but once they show an interest and place their nose to it to smell, mark and reward, dropping a treat onto the floor in front of them. Try not to attach a command until your dog understands what they need to be doing. If you want to have a go with different scents once your dog has mastered the idea of the game, you can attach different commands for different scents.

Teach a cue such as "watch me" or "look at me" or "touch"

How to: Encourage them to learn to concentrate and give total eye contact before receiving the reward of a treat or play with the toy. In the case of touch, get your dog to touch your hand with their nose before marking and giving the reward of a treat or play with a toy.

Teach them to follow the direction of your extended arm and hand

How to: Holding tasty treats between your fingers will encourage them to follow your hand in wide circular movements. You can then reward them with a treat from the hand or by tossing it onto the floor.

If you have any questions or would like further advice on these methods, please contact your practice who will be happy to help.

This document was created by the vetPartners Small Animal Clinical Board in January 2024