

4 All about mental stimulation

As well as providing physical exercise, taking your dog for a walk gives him access to a world of sniffs and smells, social interactions, learning opportunities, and visual stimulation, all of which are important for his mental wellbeing. When physical exercise is limited, so, too, are all those other important aspects, which can negatively impact on your dog's welfare in both the short term and, potentially, with lasting consequences. With a little forward planning it's easy to replace the time spent walking your dog with a range of activities that will provide him with the stimulation he needs, and thus help maintain his mental wellbeing during recovery.

Hints and tips for types of activities

Food toys

Whatever toy you choose, to get the most benefit from using it your dog will need to learn how it works. Always introduce the toy on the easiest setting, and with some high value treats inside. You can also try smearing it with a little liver or cheese paste at first to make it really attractive to him. Encourage your dog to investigate and work at the toy, and ensure he is getting at the food quickly

continued page 51

Although many dogs enjoy playing training games for a toy reward, such as a tug game, when exercise is restricted it is often difficult to use play in this manner. For this reason most of the suggestions in this chapter revolve around food use, and we suggest that, instead of feeding your dog from a bowl twice a day, you use his daily portions of food to fill food toys, play interactive games with him, as training rewards, and as search items for him to find. You may need to be creative in what you use as food treats: for example, if your dog is on a weight-loss programme low calorie treats may be needed (eg natural popcorn or pieces of apple or carrot), or if you have a very fussy dog, you may have to try a range of high value treats such as ham or cheese, reducing the amount of his usual food to compensate for the extra calories. For dogs with special dietary requirements, discuss safe treats with your vet.



Many different food toys exist; some – such as the original Kong™ – encourage dogs to chew or lick to remove the food; others, like the Twist ‘n Treat™ shown here, roll or tip over, and require some manipulation by the dog in order to release the food. Choose ones that will be suitable for your dog and his current physical abilities.



Using a range of different toys will encourage your dog to try different tactics and strategies to remove the food. This can be particularly useful for dogs who become easily frustrated as it encourages quiet perseverance in working for a delayed reward.





Some dogs will try to use sheer strength or rapid scratching at the toy in order to open the compartments, often with some success. However, in order for these toys to be most beneficial in providing mental stimulation, you want your dog to approach them with control. To encourage this, wait for him to be calm before putting the toy on the floor, and remove it if he starts to scratch too vigorously or bite at it. Give the toy back again immediately he calms down, so he begins to realise that being calm is what gains him access to the toy. Working together with the toy in this manner can be a good substitute for the more active games that you can no longer enjoy together.

REMEMBER!

There is no such thing as an indestructible toy, and even tough toys should be supervised the first few times you give them to your dog to ensure he can't break off bits and swallow them. Also, replace old, damaged toys that may break into pieces more easily.



to find food, toys, and even people. Much of their time on walks is spent sniffing at the scents left behind by other dogs, people and animals, and building a scent picture of events since they were last in that area.

You can play many different types of scent games with your dog: take a look at the pictures in this chapter for some inspiration.

In addition, games such as 'hide-and-seek' can be played with your dog by hiding treats or filled food toys around the house for him to find. At first, have someone restrain him gently, or ask him to sit and wait (if he knows how to), and let him watch you hide the item (behind a piece of furniture or under a cushion are good hiding places to start with). As you release him to find the toy, say 'find it' and let him go and get it.

After a few repetitions, begin to shut him out of the room before you hide the toy, and use 'find it' as you open the door to encourage him to search for it. When he gets really proficient at this, hide the toy in different rooms, or on different floors (assuming it's appropriate for him to climb stairs), for him to look for and find.

REMEMBER!

If your dog is uncomfortable eating in close proximity to you, or defends his food if you approach or try to remove it, then do not use the interactive food toys with him. Carefully manage all interactions that involve food so as to avoid problems.





To give your dog an opportunity for some sniffing, the easiest thing to do at home is to scatter his dry food across your lawn, kitchen floor or mat so he can spend time finding it. At first, make it relatively easy by creating small piles, especially if your grass is long, but soon you can scatter it randomly and leave him to spend several minutes looking for and eating his dinner. You can do the same with moist food by placing small portions in a selection of small bowls that you spread around or hide.



You can also use cardboard boxes for scent games. Hide a piece of food in one box and then place the box in amongst several others scattered on the floor. Encourage your dog to 'find it,' and allow him to investigate the boxes until he finds the food.