

Post-Operative Enrichment



One of the most important requirements for a successful recovery – activity restriction – can also be one of the most difficult to follow. Whether it is days, weeks or even months, reducing an energetic pets' activity can prove challenging.

While rehabilitation will vary depending on the specific procedure and the individual dog, certain principles remain constant. For orthopaedic surgeries, the recovery period is the time during which the bone and connective tissue are healing. Therefore, most Veterinarians recommend strict confinement to a crate or cage and clear avoidance of stairs, elevated furniture or any sudden bolts of energy in the months following such procedures. In theory, these recommendations may seem easy to implement, but first-hand experience tells otherwise.

Confining a normally active dog to a crate, or small pen for several weeks post-surgery can prove stressful on owner and dog alike. To avoid absolute boredom in the patient and sheer guilt for the pet parents, environmental enrichment can be the key to achieving success.

During these long days of crate rest a food stuffed toy can help keep a recovering dog occupied for hours, staving off boredom as the patient becomes an expert at extracting goodies from the toy.

The basic concept behind using a food stuffed chew toy during the recovery process is to encourage active problem solving and mental stimulation. A food filled toy encourages thought and provides an enriching activity. The random, positive reinforcement of extracting the food will keep the dog entertained both physically and mentally.

When possible, it's important to introduce the enrichment toys prior to surgery, they will prove more successful post-surgery if the dog is familiar with them and already understands how to solve the puzzles. This way owners can ensure that the toys are suited to the dogs chewing temperament and play needs.



During post-operative rehabilitation, the dog's activity level is substantially diminished and weight gain is probable. When providing food or treat-stuffed toys, owners should be encouraged to offset the dog's caloric intake by reducing the amount of food given at daily bowl feedings. If weight gain is a concern then one could simply eliminate bowl feeding altogether in favour of providing more opportunities for utilizing food filled toys. Alternatively food dispensing bowls like the new KONG® Tiltz provides an additional option for food dispensing enrichment.

Here are some tips to help owners and their pet endure restricted activity periods:

- Prepare a comfortable, safe place for the patient to rest and recover.
- Use a crate to keep them quiet and calm. Place the crate in a room with the family so the dog doesn't feel isolated and alone.
- Alleviate stress and boredom by providing a stuffed KONG® toy in the crate. This will help keep the dog focused and stimulated. Freeze for a longer lasting treat.
- Once the dog is feeling well enough for light activity, feed them using interactive food puzzles, like the KONG® Wobbler. This will help ease them back into activity and keep them occupied for longer periods of time. Supervise play to ensure that the dog does not overexert themselves.





Toy safety considerations for recovering dogs

- Choose hard-wearing toys designed for the size of the dog.
- Avoid toys with squeakers or loose parts, in case a dog should attempt to swallow or inhale these.
- Dispose of damaged or broken toys promptly.
- Avoid balls and other bouncing toys, as these are likely to encourage leaping and chasing behaviour.
- Avoid rolling food-dispensers until very late in recovery.
- Select plush/material toys for dogs who have not demonstrated destructive tendencies.
- Every time a new toy is offered, supervise closely initially to ensure that the dog is playing safely. If the dog starts to leap about with the toy or attempts to chase it, then remove the toy until a later stage in recovery.



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