

## Playing with your dog – toys

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For dogs to remain behaviourally healthy it is important that we meet their needs for physical exercise and mental stimulation. The need for mental stimulation can be met in a number of ways including:

- Walks that allow time for sniffing and environmental exploration
- Games with people, such as hide-and-seek
- Reward-based obedience training
- Fun training games
- Toys to play with alone
- Toys to use with other dogs or people.

### Toy safety

- Avoid very hard rawhide, nylon and other toys that can potentially break teeth when chewed.
- Select toys that are large enough that they cannot lodge in the throat or be swallowed.
- Check for sharp edges or parts that can be chewed off and swallowed.
- Be sure that the toys are sturdy enough that they cannot easily be chewed apart and swallowed.

Initial play with all toys should be supervised. If over time your dog appears to be unlikely to chew or tear the toy into dangerous pieces, you can consider leaving the toy available for unsupervised play. In these instances it is important that the toys are checked periodically to ensure they are still safe.

### Toys for social play

#### Tug toys

Tug toys should be big enough to allow plenty of room for your dog's mouth and your hand, so that you will not accidentally be bitten. You need to teach your dog take-and-release rules to ensure that you have control over starting and stopping the game.

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### **Throwing toys**

When throwing toys such as balls and Frisbees™, take care to position the throw to minimize stress on your dog's joints and spine when chasing. For example, throwing items low to the ground minimizes jumping and twisting in the air, which can cause injury. It is not advisable to engage in chase games when your dog has something in his/her mouth, as he/she is then more likely to run off with items than return them to you.

### **Puzzle toys**

Most dogs can be taught to play with puzzle toys that involve the owner hiding treats under removable cups or movable tiles. These are particularly valuable for elderly dogs, for those with health problems that limit physical play, and for dogs that are recuperating from surgery. These toys can be played with in a confined space and this type of play encourages appropriate social engagement with the family.

### **Football**

Football can be a great game for the family and dog. Herding dogs, in particular, seem to enjoy chasing a ball kicked about by family members.

## **Toys for solitary play**

### **Food-dispensing toys**

The most useful group of toys for solitary play are those in which food can be placed. This group includes toys that can be rolled around to release food, such as treat balls, food pyramids, Buster Cubes™ and Kong stuff-a-ball™, as well as those that need to be chewed and manipulated, such as the Kong™ and Twist 'n' Treat™. Large balls that release pieces of kibble when pushed around can also be beneficial for slowing down the dog that eats too fast and regurgitates.

### **Food chews**

Rawhide-type chews should be large enough so that your dog is most likely to gnaw on the edges rather than rip them apart. They should be soft enough to avoid fracturing teeth, but hard enough that the dog does not finish them quickly. To encourage a puppy to chew on appropriate chews or toys, you can make them more appealing by rubbing something tasty over them – such as pâté, peanut butter or yoghurt. If necessary, you can soak the end of a rawhide chew in meat juice for a short period to get the dog started.

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### **Squeaky or soft furry toys**

While many dogs will play with squeaky toys or carry around soft furry toys without destroying them, others will readily tear them up. Your dog should always be supervised with soft plush or squeaky toys.

### **Balls**

Balls that are too large to be picked up and carried can provide entertainment for some dogs, who enjoy pushing them around with their nose or paws.

### **! Some warnings**

- If toys are constantly available, some dogs may lose interest in them. To prevent this, always keep a few toys out of reach and rotate the toys available every week or two.
- If your dog shows a tendency to destroy toys, speak to your veterinary surgeon, who can advise you regarding tougher squeaky and soft toys, or alternatively use them during times when you interact with your dog and remove them at all other times. Swallowed toys can constitute a health risk.
- Some dogs can become protective of toys or chews around other dogs or people and act aggressively when approached. Should your dog show any inclination to defend toys, contact your veterinary surgeon immediately so that they can assist you in resolving the situation.