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MUZZLE TRAINING YOUR DOG

Why should I muzzle my dog?

If you know your dog has any potential to be aggressive, then it is irresponsible to risk the health of others by not taking suitable precautions. This may not mean that a muzzle would be used in all situations; only those in which there is a potential for injury based on how your dog has reacted in similar situations in the past. In addition, muzzles might be advisable, even if the dog has not yet displayed aggressive tendencies, in those situations where the dog might become fearful or defensive. Muzzles can also be used to test the dog's response to potentially problematic situations, to help introduce dogs that might be aggressive to people or other animals, and to temporarily prevent damage to the household in dogs that ingest or destroy objects in the environment. In certain jurisdictions, where breed bans have been introduced, or where a dog has been determined to be potentially dangerous, muzzle use in public may have been mandated by law.

Aren't muzzles cruel?

Muzzles themselves are not cruel, but they may cause welfare problems if they are not used appropriately. If the guidelines below are followed, your pet should actually enjoy being muzzled. The most common errors are to only use a muzzle when something nasty is going to happen to your pet, e.g. when he is about to be injected; to expect your dog to instantly accept the muzzle; or to leave the muzzle on excessively.

What types of muzzle are there?

There are two common types of muzzle, the basket muzzle and the nylon muzzle. Both have their uses. The basket muzzle allows your dog more freedom to pant and drink if properly fitted. The nylon muzzle prevents the dog from opening its mouth, and may lead to overheating if left on the dog too long since it restricts panting and drinking. Some nylon muzzles have a mesh over the end to provide for a looser fit and more opportunity to pant, while others have a medium size opening at the end for the nose and mouth where small tidbits can also be given. However, the dog may still provide a small nip with this latter type of muzzle.



How do I train my dog to enjoy being muzzled?

It is important to find an effective and comfortable muzzle for your dog. This may take a bit of time but it is worth shopping around. Some muzzles can be easily slipped off by pawing at them. A proper fitting muzzle should be difficult if not impossible for your dog to remove. Some muzzles come with (or can be affixed with) a strap that attaches from the muzzle over the top of the dog's head (passing between the eyes) to the dog's collar so that it cannot be pulled off by the dog.

Your dog should not be muzzled initially in a conflict or fearful situation. Show your dog the muzzle, let him sniff to investigate it and give him a treat before putting the muzzle away. Repeat this procedure several times. This starts to build a positive association with the muzzle.

Next turn the muzzle to face your dog and place some treats inside and encourage him to take them out. Gradually place the treats further inside so that he sticks his head all the way into the muzzle.

Next slip the muzzle on without fastening it for a few seconds and reward your dog when you take it off. Slowly increase the time you leave it on from a few seconds to a minute or more and no longer reward your pet every time unless he remains calm. Be sure to set things up so your dog succeeds, by only placing the muzzle on for short periods of time. We want the muzzle to be removed when the dog is calm and quiet, not fussing or pawing. Each time you offer the muzzle to your dog try placing treats inside for a pleasant association with the procedure. When the muzzle is on, you can offer treats through the side as well.

Now that your dog accepts the muzzle, you can try fastening it. Again the length of time that it is left on needs to be increased gradually. While the muzzle is on the dog your dog can be rewarded with affection or play if it can be sufficiently distracted so that it does not show any fear. If your dog enjoys walks or games of chase, this might be a sufficient enough diversion to help him or her adapt to the muzzle more quickly. The longer the time that the muzzle is left on the greater the reward should be when it comes off, particularly if your dog has made no effort to remove it. You should aim to work towards keeping your dog muzzled for about thirty minutes. The goal is to only remove the muzzle when the dog is calm and quiet, not struggling. If you remove the muzzle immediately after the dog struggles or paws at it, the dog may learn that these actions get the muzzle removed. Using treats intermittently through out the process will help many dogs adjust.

Start muzzling your dog before you go for walks, but continue to avoid situations that might lead to fear, anxiety or conflict for your dog. If you feel you must take the muzzle off for some of the time, do it when you start to head home and get your dog to keep to a close heel on the lead as long as the muzzle is removed. Always give him lots of praise when you take the muzzle off.

Once this routine has been established, your dog should be muzzled before you encounter known conflict or problem situations. Your pet should still be muzzled at other times for play and walks so that it does not start to resent or predict these few necessary occasions. Some dogs can also wear a head halter underneath the muzzle for additional control.

You should never remove the muzzle when your pet is trying to remove it. He can be encouraged to leave it alone by a slight tug on a lead. When he relaxes, the muzzle can be removed and take note that you may have been expecting too much too soon. The important

rule is to work at a rate that your pet can accept and cope with. This may mean that the whole program may take a few weeks rather than a few days.

This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB

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