

Injury Prevention for Your Best Friend

Did you know dogs can get “Weekend Warrior” injuries, too? Pulled muscles, painful joints, tendon strains, ligament sprains, or worse. We all feel the joy and freedom of the open trail, a five-mile hike, or a brisk run in the fresh air and nature after five days of being cooped up. We also feel the pain of not being prepared for the exertion. The good news is that there are things we can do to help our pets avoid experiencing the same aches and pains we experience. Let’s face it: we all care more about our pet’s comfort than our own, so if you’re not going to do it yourself, you’ll know how to do it for your best friend.

Remember, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure”:

Warm them up: Something as simple as walking your dog at a moderate, controlled pace on leash for 10 minutes before a sporting event, sprinting, or whatever chaos ensues off leash will make those muscles, tendons, and ligaments more pliable and less prone to injury. Better yet, give those muscles a massage. Who wouldn’t sign up for that?

Stretch them out: Just like we do with our side bends and calf stretches before we take off for a run, our pups should stretch, too. One easy way to perform a nice body stretch for your furry friend is to teach them to spin in a circle. Don’t forget to teach them both directions. Heck, you can even name them, twist and shout, and make it a trick. Or better yet, teach them to do figure 8s around your body and between your legs. Not only is this a great side stretch, but you’ll look cool doing it! Don’t forget about hip flexors. This is a common source of pain and discomfort for dogs that explode into a run without warming up.

For an active stretch, ask your pup to put their front paws up on the stairs, an ottoman, or a box so their hind limbs are straight under them for 15-30 seconds. For a passive stretch, slowly and gently extend your pup’s hind legs straight out behind them individually for 15-30 seconds. This can be done with them lying down or standing. Is your pup not to this level? Look up “cookie stretches” to loosen them up.

Build their endurance: Rather than “just going for it” on a five miler, build endurance slowly over several weeks. Add a little more distance and time each day. An easy way to build endurance in the natural environment is to add a little hill work. Walking those hills will be great for you and your pet.

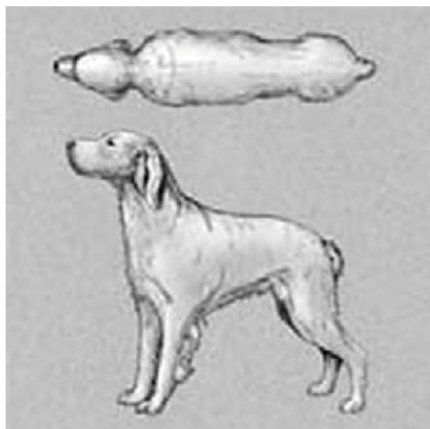
Weather changes can really impact endurance, so be sure to watch for subtle signs of fatigue (look for these tips in the future). Short on time, or the weather isn’t helping your pup’s fitness plan? Dogs can be trained on treadmills, too. Just make sure that it is long enough for your pet. Most human treadmills aren’t made for the speed and length of stride of medium and large breed dogs. Treadmills designed for dogs also have additional safety features that help prevent accidents. Of course, this activity should only be done under direct supervision.

Improve their foot awareness: Dogs don’t really think about what the back half of their body is doing when they are looking forward. If they can’t see it, it’s just along for the ride. The good news is that they can be trained to have better overall foot awareness and control, which will go a long way for injury prevention. Some simple items like pool noodles, 2 X 4s, or lengths of PVC pipe can be randomly arranged in a pile on the floor or ground like pick-up sticks. For just a few seconds each day, slowly

walk the dog over them. Rearrange them often. You can up the challenge by stepping over them, too. Even walking a dog over a ladder placed flat on the ground will help with foot awareness and control. You can build your own ground “ladder” out of PVC pipe or purchase one online (Ref: [Agility Ladder](#)).

Strengthen their core: We know a strong core improves stability and control, which will help prevent injuries. Build core strength slowly by teaching your dog to “sit pretty” or do the “chipmunk”. They sit up straight with their butts on the ground and their front paws in the air. Too hard in the beginning? Use your arm, an ottoman, a box, or whatever to support them until they can support themselves. The longer they can hold it the stronger they are. If this is still too hard or joint disease or back pain would make this exercise difficult or dangerous, start by gently swaying your furry friend front to back and side to side. The minor instability this creates will engage their core. Too easy? Challenge them to stand on an unstable surface like a cushion, a balance disc, a “wobble board” or even that neglected Bosu ball in the corner of your basement.

Keep them lean: Well, obviously, you say. Few people know how to judge their pet’s body condition correctly. On a scale from 1 to 5, your pet should fall at a 3. On a scale from 1 to 9, your pet should fall at a 4.5 or 5. What does that look like? You should be able to easily feel your ribs without excess fat covering them or maybe even be able to see them slightly. Your pet should have a waist when viewed from above and an abdominal tuck-up when viewed from the side.



©2010 Journal of the American Animal Hospital Association. All rights reserved. Available at aahanet.org/PublicDocuments/NutritionalAssessmentGuidelines.pdf

Want to level up your pup’s fitness game? Check out Penn Vet Working Dog Center Performance Medicine and their Fit to Work and Canimetrics™ fitness programs. <https://www.facebook.com/CaninePerformanceMedicine/>

Please consult your veterinarian before starting your pet on any exercise or endurance program.