



Covid 19 – Food-Based Enrichment for Dogs

Meeting a dog's physical, mental and emotional needs can be challenging for caregivers who are self-isolating, and when exercise opportunities are limited due to current pandemic restrictions. However, the following are ideas to meet these needs under current restrictions.

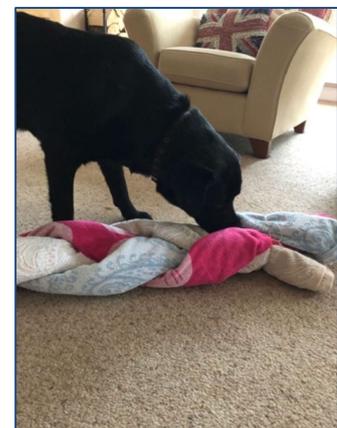
All dogs are individuals, and many will have natural preferences for the types of activities they like to engage with. Some dogs may also have physical traits or medical conditions which mean certain activities are difficult or uncomfortable for them. Please therefore consider any limitations your dog may have before selecting activities appropriate for them. To understand more about your dog's natural preferences for activities, give them a variety of these and allow your dog to show you their preferences.

Please note: It is important that your dog receives a healthy balanced diet. To ensure that you are feeding the correct amount, weigh out your dog's food each day, remove the amount that will be replaced by higher-value food treats and then use the remaining food for activity feeding throughout the day. If your dog has dietary allergies or sensitivities and you wish to provide food-based enrichment, you can use their regular food in novel ways (replace suggested food ideas below for regular food). Alternatively, **if your Veterinary Surgeon agrees**, infuse regular food with the scent of other food, so that this appears more valuable. For example, regular food and another 'smelly' food can be stored in a sealed container, without them touching or with a breathable partition between them. The regular food can then be given as food treats, Kong® fillings or as scattered food for a search activity.

Dogs should be supervised when engaged in activities, and toys and other resources should be regularly inspected to ensure that they remain safe. If your dog shows aggression around food or other resources, do not attempt the following ideas and instead seek advice from a Clinical Animal Behaviourist accredited by the Animal Behaviour and Training Council (<http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk/>).

Scatter feeding

This simple technique can be done in a garden or indoors. Regular dog food (dry kibble or small portions of moist food in small bowls) or other food treats such as tiny pieces of cooked meat or grated cheese can be scattered, so that your dog engages in a search activity. This should be easy initially, with food scattered over a small area or in a 'snuffle mat'. Old towels or fabric can be plaited, and food treats can be tucked amongst the interlaced strands. As your dog becomes skilled with this, make it gradually more challenging by hiding food in long grass, behind garden furniture or plant pots, behind indoor furniture or dog toys, or amongst a scrunched up towel or blanket.



Filled toys and containers

Searching, chewing and licking are naturally calming activities for dogs, plus they are great energy-outlets. Activities can be created using various materials or commercial toys. Empty food containers such as kitchen roll tubes, cereal boxes, egg cartons or cardboard boxes

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(with staples, sticky tape and other hazards removed) can be filled with a mixture of scrunched up or shredded waste paper and kibble or food treats, before the box is closed or the kitchen roll tube is plugged either end with large balls of waste paper. Dogs new to this may need the item to be loosely closed or plugged initially. Your dog can then be allowed to rip this apart to access the food. Commercial toys include Kong's®, which are available in various sizes. Ideal Kong® fillings include natural yoghurt or a mixture of regular dog food, cooked meat, chopped carrot and cheese-gratings. The end of the Kong can be 'plugged' with peanut butter or cream cheese. These should be loosely-filled for dogs new to Kong's®, but for more experienced dogs these can be tightly packed. Experiment with freezing the filled Kong too, as the contents and fun last longer!

Note: If giving your dog cardboard items to destroy, you may wish to only give these in the garden or in a specific part of the home – to reduce the risk of your dog generalising their enjoyable destructive behaviour to cardboard items which you do not want them to destroy (aim to keep the context for this specific).



Search activities

Dogs have an amazing sense of smell, and many dogs love to sniff out food, toys or even people. To provide your dog with food-based scent games, experiment with hiding regular food or food treats inside or under flower pots, muffin trays or plastic cups. Food can be placed in several cups within a muffin tray, and then tennis balls or large balls of waste paper can be placed in each of the cups – so that your dog has the challenge of finding the food. For dogs familiar with a 'find it' cue or similar, they can be released from another room or area to find the treats on cue.

Activity or puzzle feeders

A range of commercial activity or puzzle feeders are available for dogs, from those that the dog simply licks (i.e. Lickimats®), through to those they must roll around or tip over to get food to fall out, and then more complicated puzzles that require more manipulation and problem-solving. If commercial activity or puzzle feeds are used, these must consider the individual dog's physical, sensory and cognitive abilities. Dogs can become frustrated if these are too challenging. An easy introduction to these toys can often be helpful, and then the challenge level can be gradually increased as the dog becomes more skilled in their strategies and tactics.



Chewing material

A range of chew toys are available for dogs, including moulded plastic (i.e. Nylabone®), commercial tree roots, rawhide, deer antlers, tripe, dried animal organs and textured/moulded edible chews (often marketed towards dental health). Chews should be carefully selected, as there can be risks associated with choking and splintering. Dogs should be supervised when they have access to a chew. Anything that is brittle and can splinter, or where there is risk of choke-sized pieces breaking away, should be removed. Many toys and Kong-type activity feeders can also serve as chewing material. If your dog

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seems disinterested initially in their chew activity, try smearing this with some natural yoghurt or cream cheese to encourage interest.

Food as training rewards

Regular food and food treats can be given as training rewards for exercises which your dog is already familiar with (i.e. 'sit' or 'stay') through to newly-introduced cues and exercises. Training sessions should initially be short and in areas where there are minimal distractions. Training should always be 'good fun' for both the dog and their caregiver, and dogs should be set up to succeed with this. Please refer to dog training books and resources (including online ones) developed by members of the Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians, or of those registered as Animal training Instructors with the Animal behaviour and Training Council (<http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk/>).



Novelty, novelty, novelty!

As well as enjoying a predictable routine, many dogs enjoy an element of novelty when it comes to enrichment. Please therefore regularly introduce novel ways of feeding them, and rotate the activities that they enjoy. The same activity can also be provided in numerous contexts to maintain its interest and novelty-value. For example, the time of day that this is given, the circumstances in which this is presented, and the type of food that is given can all be varied.

Always ensure that your dog has opportunity to rest throughout the day, in addition to them engaging in stimulating activities at times. Calm chewing activities, such as those described above, can help a dog to relax when given in a calm environment.

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