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Conditioning Your Dog to Wear a Muzzle

While no one likes to have a dog that needs to wear a muzzle at the vet, sometimes it is unavoidable. For animals with a bite history or animals that are especially fearful or aggressive at the vet, a muzzle may be a necessity. In some situations having a muzzle on actually is calming to your dog and can reduce the amount of restraint that is needed to handle him or her, allowing them to be less fearful.

Dogs that need to wear a muzzle at the vet benefit greatly from being conditioned to wear the muzzle at home. This means that they will be comfortable with the muzzle on and it won't cause them any added anxiety. We want to decrease your dog's anxiety at the clinic whenever possible, and putting a muzzle on him when he isn't used to it can be a stressful experience. The good news is that dogs can very easily be conditioned to be comfortable having a muzzle put on, and can even be taught to enjoy it! The other good news is that the process is not actually that hard!

Step 1. Choose a muzzle. There are a few different types of muzzles available. The most common ones are a standard nylon muzzle or a plastic or metal basket muzzle. Either type will work. Basket muzzles are roomier and allow the dog to pant freely and even drink water and should be used if the muzzle will need to stay on for longer than a few minutes. Nylon muzzles are easy to train with because of the large opening. When fitting a standard nylon muzzle make sure it is snug enough to prevent biting but not so tight as to impede your dog's breathing at all. You dog should still be able to nibble on a small treat, or lick peanut butter. The basket muzzle should be big enough that your dog's muzzle fits easily within it, without the "basket" pressing up against him at all and should fit snuggly around the back of the head so it will not fall off. One thing to consider when choosing a muzzle is if your dog has had a negative experience with a muzzle before, if so – choose the variety of muzzle he has not seen before!

Proper fitting for each type of muzzle

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Step 2. Choose your bait. You will want to use high value treats for this process. Something soft, smelly and easy to eat such as Pupperoni, boiled chicken breast or cheese. You can also use something spreadable like squeeze cheese or peanut butter. Make sure your dog is hungry and that he really loves these treats. For this example we will use the idea of peanut butter smeared on a long handled mixing spoon. If using a basket muzzle, you will have to use a treat in your fingers rather than peanut butter on a spoon (or peanut butter on a long straw perhaps) and modify the technique a bit.

Step 3. Start by extending the spoon (or your hand with a treat) through the muzzle so the tasty treat is far enough away from the muzzle that the dog can freely eat the treat without worrying. Let your dog see the peanut butter spoon first, then present it. Your dog should immediately move over and start licking the spoon. Let him lick (or munch) for 5-10 seconds and then remove the muzzle and spoon. You want to remove it before your dog is done eating, leaving him thinking "*oh no! I hope that comes back again!"* Repeat this step a handful of times so your dog really gets the association of the muzzle and the treat. (If you are not using a spoon and are just holding the treat out in front of the muzzle be careful to remove both from your dog at the same time – you want to really associate the two together)

Step 4. Now pull the spoon (or the treat) in closer to the muzzle so your dog has to stick his nose into the muzzle a bit to get the tasty treat. Show this to your dog and then offer it to him. Hold onto the muzzle firmly so your dog doesn't accidently push it away from him while he is eating. **Resist the urge to try to slip the muzzle on your dog at this point!** Again, allow your dog to lick the peanut butter or tasty treat for a few seconds, then remove the muzzle and the treat simultaneously. Your dog should be looking at you expectantly at this point, waiting for the tasty muzzle to return. Repeat this step a few times until your dog is very comfortable with it.

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Step 5. Now pull the spoon (or treat) back further so it is just on the other side of the muzzle so your dog has to stick his nose all the way in to get it. Make sure to keep it close to the muzzle so your dog doesn't try to just go around the muzzle. Offer the treat muzzle back to your dog, allowing him to push him nose into it to get at the goodies. Make sure to hold the muzzle securely so the dog feels the resistance against his nose as he pushes into the muzzle. Repeat this step many times until your dog is eagerly sticking his nose right into the muzzle.

Step 6. Now when your dog sticks his nose into the muzzle, clip the muzzle in place. Continue to let him lick at the peanut butter or treat for a few seconds, then take the muzzle off. If you have worked slowly to this point your dog should not be alarmed by this at all. Don't push your luck by leaving the muzzle on for too long yet.

Step 7. Now just repeat this step, gradually adding time a few seconds at a time. Your dog can continue to lick the peanut butter for this process, or if he is really un-phased by it all you can give him a nice massage with the muzzle on.

Ta-da! Now you have a dog who loves his muzzle (aka – the peanut butter dispenser!). The amount of time this will take will vary between dogs based on their personalities and any previous bad experiences with a muzzle. A dog that has never had to wear a muzzle before may fly through this in a couple of days with a few short sessions a day. A dog who has a negative association with the muzzle will take longer, and will need you to be even more patient and go slow. Do not rush this process as you will end up with a dog who fears the muzzle. Muzzle train for a few minutes at a time a few times a day, always stop

before your dog wants you to – leave him wanting more and he will be so excited to see the muzzle come out again!