



Muzzles

Why They're Important and How to Get Your Dog Comfortable Wearing One

Muzzles may not be the most appealing piece of dog gear to own, but it may be one of our most essential pieces. The popular view of dogs in muzzles is that those dogs must be dangerous, but the reality is that those dogs are safer amongst the world than those not wearing one. Most of us are aware that all dogs can bite, just like all humans can hit. In the wrong set of circumstances, after the wrong sequence of negative events – our dogs may be more likely to reach the point where they think they need to bite to defend themselves. Muzzles can prevent them from incidentally causing any injury to another animal or human in situations where a bite may be more likely to happen. In California, we have the dangers of earthquakes and fires, where we may need to evacuate or shelter with other animals and people, if your dog already knows how to wear a muzzle, this process may be a whole lot safer and a lot less stressful for them.

Additionally, muzzles aren't just for keeping those around your dog safe – they're also for keeping them safe. If your dog is known to pick things up that may not be safe for them or has trouble giving those kinds of things up – wearing a muzzle on the hiking trail may save you a trip to the Emergency Vet!

Many dogs can be managed at home by utilizing a spare room or a crate. Wearing a muzzle helps you manage your dog while you're out in the community and can't control your environment as closely. People would be more likely to give your dog a wider 'bubble' as well as more likely to ask whether your dog would be okay being pet or saying hello. The muzzle is your seatbelt. You hope you won't need it, but you're very thankful to have it, should circumstances beyond your control transpire.

It is extremely important to expose your dog to the muzzle gradually and pair the muzzle with good things. By doing this, your dog will be able to maintain their normal behaviors while learning to enjoy wearing a muzzle, the same way they adjusted to wearing a collar or harness. If we rush and place the muzzle on without conditioning our dogs, we often suppress behavior to the point where we cannot properly observe if our dogs are gaining comfort around previously scary things, or we teach our dogs that we can be scary when we force them to wear things, causing potential for the same issues we're avoiding by using a muzzle. With that, if you're in an urgent situation, muzzle your dog and plan to work through the issues later.

What Kind of Muzzle Should my Dog Wear?

For your dog's comfort and safety, it's important that they can perform normal behaviors while wearing their muzzle. They need to be able to pant, drink and eat while wearing their muzzle. You'll want to look specifically for a basket muzzle if you're planning to use a muzzle for any longer than just a couple

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of minutes. Your vet or groomer may use a nylon muzzle, for momentary protection, but this does not allow for proper panting, eating or drinking and should not be used for walks and training.

In order to properly fit your dog, the muzzle must be tight enough that it cannot move around the face but not so tight that it cuts into the dog's fur. The strap should be tight enough that you can barely get one finger between the strap and the dog's head.

How to Get Your Dog Comfortable Wearing the Muzzle:

Remember to go at your dog's pace and to plan to take a few days to get your dog's comfort. The first hurdle is getting our dogs to accept the muzzle, then place their face into the muzzle, then allow the muzzle to be attached to their body and finally, wearing the muzzle long term. If you're hitting snags along the way or noticing your dog begin to avoid the muzzle or consistently attempt to remove the muzzle, go back a few steps. You should be seeing your dog display anticipatory behaviors in the presence of the muzzle, like wagging, moving closer, licking their lips and consistently remaining near you. If you're seeing less of these behaviors, spend a little more time on the first step!

1. Show your dog the muzzle and then give high value foods, then put the muzzle behind or back. When you hide the muzzle, the tasty snacks go away. Repeat until your dog looks very excited to see the muzzle (because he's learned it predicts treats!) Do this a minimum of 10 times before moving onto the next step!
2. Hold the muzzle low and cup your hand behind it so it's a treat bowl. Slowly move the muzzle away from your dog's nose as he is eating from it. Your dog may put his nose in but do not push the muzzle onto his nose.
3. Begin increasing the amount of time your dog's nose is in the muzzle with peanut butter, spray cheese or cream cheese.
4. While your dog's nose is in the muzzle licking food, begin to play with the straps (lifting around neck). Do not attempt to buckle them yet.
5. Loosely buckle the straps and then immediately unbuckle them and remove the muzzle. Repeat this step a minimum of 10 times. Allow your dog short breaks in between the repetitions, they may need to shake off some stress or play a little to disperse anxiety and reset in between.
6. Buckle the straps securely. Continue to play and feed your dog through the muzzle as you take your time gradually building up the amount of time he wears it. A minute at first, then take off. Two minutes and remove, etc.

If your dog paws at the muzzle distract him by moving around, happy talk and treats. You may remove the muzzle when your dog is not pawing at it. If your dog constantly tries to remove the muzzle, repeat some earlier steps to ensure he is enjoying it before continuing.

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