

Training Your Dog to Wear a Basket Muzzle

To help your dog learn to wear a muzzle, we recommend using a technique called “Desensitization and Counterconditioning.” This process helps turn a scary or disliked item into something fun and positive. When using desensitization and counterconditioning, it is important to progress slowly and at a pace where your dog stays calm and relaxed. If you rush the process, the training will not be effective.

We recommend using a basket muzzle (as opposed to a tube-shaped nylon muzzle) so your dog can take treats and pant while wearing it.

Do not leave a muzzle on your dog while he is unattended. Your dog could scratch at it to try to get it off and injure himself.

Training Process:

1. Introduce the muzzle as a “treat basket” to your dog. Show your dog the muzzle and allow him to smell it. Drop a treat inside the muzzle (large enough that it won’t fall out). Hold the muzzle so that **your dog can** put his nose into the muzzle to retrieve the treat and say your cue: “Muzzle Up!” He should be the one to put his nose into the muzzle while you are merely holding it. Repeat around 10 times before ending the session. Do not force your dog’s nose in the muzzle. If your dog will not take a hard treat/kibble from the muzzle, try something with higher value, like small bits of hot dog or string cheese. If he won’t take that from inside the muzzle take a step back and put treats next to the muzzle, on the muzzle, at the edge of the muzzle etc. slowly working your way into having the treats in the inside at the base of the muzzle.

Note: Going slowly now, makes the whole process go faster in the long run. If you scare your dog, you will have to spend a lot longer at step one, so please be patient.

Repeat this process daily for a couple of weeks before moving on to the next step. Try to wait to move on to step 2 until your dog is EXCITED to see the muzzle and readily puts his nose in the basket for a treat.

2. Fasten the muzzle to your dog. Start once again with dropping a treat/kibble into the muzzle and say your cue “Muzzle up!” When your dog places his nose in the muzzle, fasten the buckle at the top of his head and then immediately undo and remove. Repeat around five times, making sure you end the session before your dog gets frustrated.

Repeat this process daily for a few days more. As your dog gets more comfortable with fastening and unfastening the buckle, you can try leaving the muzzle on for a few seconds before removing it. **Try smearing the inside of the muzzle with a xylitol-free peanut butter or spray cheese for him to lick off.** This will help him stay occupied so you can leave the muzzle on for a longer duration (2-3 minutes).

Continued...

Go for a walk while your dog wears the muzzle. One your dog will stay calm while you fasten the muzzle and will wear it for a couple of minutes, try putting it on at the beginning of a brief leash walk (five minutes). This will help your dog stay occupied while wearing the muzzle and help him have a positive association. You should slowly work up to taking longer walks until your dog can wear the muzzle for 30 minutes or longer without pawing at it or trying to remove it.

Tips for Success:

- Use treats that your dog values - treats that smell and taste wonderful
- Try to end each session on good note: when you notice that your dog is more relaxed and places his head in the muzzle without worry.
- Start each session on the previous step to what you ended on in your last session. You might find that your dog is back to being alert and a little worried about the muzzle and that's OK. Move on to the next step only when, **at the start of a session**, your dog is relaxed and enjoying getting treats.
- Avoid exposure to the muzzle between your training sessions. Ideally, your dog should not experience the muzzle at all except during training sessions, when the exposure is controlled and you're actively counterconditioning with treats.
- Vary the time of day of your sessions, the location (if possible), and the kind of treats you use. Avoid carrying your treats in a special bag or, if you need to use a treat bag, carry that bag with you around the house sometimes and don't give any treats. This will help your dog learn the right association: Muzzle = Treats, **not** Treat Bag = Treats.
- Once your dog is comfortable with wearing the muzzle, try to do maintenance sessions at least twice a month to continue his comfort with it.

**Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions.
Call our free pet behavior help line at (503) 416-2983.**