



Muzzle training

When introduced in a positive and fun way, dogs can learn to enjoy wearing a muzzle just like they learn to wear their collar or harness.

There are lots of reasons a dog may benefit from wearing a muzzle, including:

- For safety when a dog is frightened, ill or injured. Fear, pain or illness can affect the way a dog feels and behaves. If your dog is muzzle trained, a vet can provide care quickly and safely in an emergency.
- To prevent dogs eating things that could be harmful. For dogs on strict diets, or those who try to eat things they shouldn't, a muzzle could be a life saver.
- To keep dogs, and those around them, safe. A muzzle can be essential for dogs who have been known to behave aggressively in certain situations, or dogs who have learnt to chase and catch.
- If they are required to by law.

Remember, a muzzle won't change the way your dog feels about a particular situation or trigger. Even with a muzzle on, it's important to try to avoid situations that make your dog feel worried. Being exposed to scary situations is unpleasant and could make their behaviour worse in the long term. A qualified behaviourist will be able to support you in changing the way your dog feels.

Choosing a muzzle

A good choice of muzzle is one that your dog can eat, drink and pant through, such as a basket type muzzle. The muzzle needs to fit your dog comfortably without obscuring their vision, digging into their face, or restricting their mouth movement. Aim for as much comfort as possible while ensuring security.

You can wrap non-irritant fabric around the nose-piece to prevent it from rubbing if necessary.



Seek professional support

If your dog isn't relaxed with people being near their food bowl, or they can resource guard food, then this method may not be suitable for you. Contact an accredited behaviourist for support.

If you know your dog struggles with having their face or head touched, you'll need to work on this first with the support of a qualified professional.

For advice on sourcing a behaviourist please visit:

[dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/behaviour/finding-behaviour-and-training-support](https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/behaviour/finding-behaviour-and-training-support)

Introduce the muzzle



If you haven't already, take a look at our handout on **markers** which explains how to introduce a marker to your dog. A marker is a clear signal that tells your dog they've got it right and can be really helpful when training a new behaviour.

When you're starting training, always make sure your dog is free to remove their face from the muzzle whenever they wish. Give them the choice to put their nose in and out and move away - this will help build their confidence and trust in you.

Begin training in a familiar, quiet area where you and your dog are relaxed. Prepare some small treats to reward your dog. A tube of paste (such as squeezy cheese or pate) can be handy to reward your dog more easily through the muzzle. Remember to keep sessions short and sweet!

1. Start with the muzzle behind your back. Bring it into view and when your dog looks at the muzzle, mark and reward them by throwing a treat away from you. Put the muzzle behind your back again and repeat – lots!
2. Put the muzzle on the floor. Place some treats around and next to the muzzle. Then begin to pop a treat just inside the opening of the muzzle.
3. Next, hold the muzzle in one hand at your dog's nose height. Make sure the muzzle is held still and not moved towards your dog. Place a treat (or some squeezy cheese / paste) at the edge of or opening of the muzzle. As your dog is finishing, start to slowly move the muzzle away from your dog (towards you). Repeat this until your dog is happily eating from the edge of the muzzle.

4. Then, put the paste / squeezey cheese further into the muzzle. Of if you're using solid treats, cup the muzzle in your hand to stop treats falling out, and drop a treat further into it. Allow your dog to put their face into the muzzle to take the treat. Repeat this, gradually putting the treat further into the muzzle, until your dog is happily putting their nose into it.
5. Now, don't put any treats in the muzzle, and wait for your dog to put their nose into it – looking for a treat. When they put their nose in, mark and reward them for this by popping a treat (or squeezing some paste) through a gap in the end of the muzzle. Repeat this several times. Your dog will be learning to like putting their face inside the muzzle with every go!

Learning to love the muzzle

Show your dog the muzzle — at this point they should be happy to put their nose into it.

Slowly build up the time your dog spends in the muzzle: post treats or paste through the end of the muzzle while they choose to stay in position.

You can also try holding the muzzle further away to encourage your dog to move towards it.

If your dog seems unsure at any point, go back to a stage at which they were relaxed and practise for a bit longer. Then progress more slowly.



Add in movement

To help your dog feel confident walking in their muzzle, it's important to start building in some movement.

Repeat what you've been doing, and take a step or two backwards while holding the muzzle. This will encourage your dog to walk with you. Reward your dog with paste or treats through the end of the muzzle for coming with you. This should be fun for your dog!

Gradually build up how many steps you take – always move away from your dog and not towards them.



Introducing the straps

Don't rush to do up the straps of your muzzle, give your dog plenty of time to get familiar with the sound and feeling of the muzzle first.

First, make sure your dog is relaxed with the noise of the clip or buckle (as this will eventually be done up right behind their ears). While in the same room as your dog, but at a distance, fasten the clip or buckle a few times. If your dog notices the sound and remains calm, give them a treat so they'll associate this sound with good things happening. Continue doing this, getting closer to your dog every few times you close the clip.

Providing your dog is relaxed with the sound of the clip/buckle and comfortable keeping their face inside the muzzle for some time, start to gently touch and move the straps. It helps to extend the straps beforehand, so they're at their longest and loosest setting at this stage of your training.

Build up to draping the straps loosely over your dog's neck, then let them slip off again. Mark and reward your dog for remaining relaxed and keeping their face in the muzzle as the straps move.

Doing up the straps

When your dog is happy keeping their nose in the muzzle with you holding the straps, begin to fiddle with the clips. There's no need to rush into doing up the strap completely. Start by moving the straps around behind your dog's ears as though you are going to do it up — but don't actually do it up yet. Let them get familiar with the feeling of the straps tightening first, remembering to mark and reward them for keeping their face in the muzzle.

Next you can progress to fastening the clips. To start with, undo them again right away. Mark and reward your dog for being calm and choosing to stay in position.



Leaving the muzzle on for longer

Now that your dog is relaxed and confident wearing the muzzle with the straps done up, begin leaving the muzzle on for increasing periods of time. Start with just a few seconds, and then increase in very small increments.

Build in some fun activities for your dog. You could play some simple ‘find it’ games with treats in the house or garden, or practise behaviours they already know like ‘sit’ and reward them. Plan the activity before you put the muzzle on your dog – so there’s no delay once the muzzle is on.

Gradually build up the amount of time your dog wears the muzzle during these activities. Over time, you can slowly start giving less and less treats.

Once your dog is ready, you can introduce occasional short sessions where they are not getting rewarded whilst wearing the muzzle. Do this just for a few seconds to begin with, then slowly build up the time. For example, you could pop the muzzle on while you do brief jobs around the house.

Once you’ve practised all of the above, you can start introducing the muzzle outside on a quiet walk. Stick to short walks at first and build up to longer ones. Always have some treats or paste with you so you can reward your dog for calm, relaxed behaviours.

By now your dog should see the muzzle as nothing to worry about at all.



Refresh your training

Redo these steps every so often to help your dog keep a positive association with their muzzle. Even dogs who wear a muzzle every day can benefit from a refresher.

Using a muzzle before your dog is ready

If you've started your training and you need to fully muzzle your dog for any reason, use a completely different style of muzzle. If you're at the vet, they might have a selection available. Use a different muzzle for this short intervention to minimise disruption to training with your dog's own muzzle.



If your dog seems worried or tries to remove the muzzle

If your dog starts rubbing or pawing at the muzzle to remove it, try to engage them in something else to distract them. Then, remove the muzzle and go back a stage, to when they were relaxed. Keep repeating that stage for a while to build their confidence before trying to progress again. When you do, go slower.

If your dog's skin seems irritated or sore, or they can't behave normally while wearing the muzzle (they should be able to eat, drink and pant through it), then it might mean the size, shape, or material of the muzzle is not right for your dog. Speak to your vet for advice on finding the right muzzle.

If your dog is worried by the muzzle, they might try to avoid it altogether or stretch forward tentatively because they want the food but don't want to approach the muzzle. They might have worn one before and not enjoyed it, or they might just be naturally cautious about something new.

If this is the case, you can try placing the muzzle onto the floor and dropping treats nearby, so your dog can eat them without getting too close or touching the muzzle. As your dog gains confidence, you can gradually place the treats closer to the muzzle.

If your dog appears very worried about seeing the muzzle or being near it, do not continue, and contact an accredited behaviourist for support. It's well worth taking the time to help your dog feel differently about the muzzle. You should find doing so helps in other areas of your dog's life too!

Contacts for further support

We provide lifelong telephone-based behavioural support for all our adopted dogs. If you need help for your **Dogs Trust dog** please email:

postadoptionssupport@dogstrust.org.uk

Everyone else can access support by emailing our training and behaviour helpline:

behavioursupportline@dogstrust.org.uk

Your nearest Dog School Team are also happy to help and can be contacted via:

dogstrustdogschoo.org.uk

The advice contained in this handout is of a general nature and is no substitute for specific behavioural or veterinary advice. If you are worried about your dog, then do consult your vet.

A dog is for life ®

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