

Conditioning & Exercising

Conditioning refers to physical exercises and activities that help to build & maintain muscle, improve strength & flexibility, and encourage more focused & conscious body movements that help improve coordination. Increasing strength, muscling & flexibility in your dog helps them to be less prone to injury, recover faster from injuries, and have better mobility and quality of life.

Incorporating conditioning exercises into your dog's daily or weekly routine can be easy & fun. Whether you want your dog to get into better shape for sports or working dog activities, lose a little "extra padding", have an older dog whose mobility you want to improve or you just want to improve overall strength, coordination & flexibility, conditioning work can help. This article includes some key points, tips and tricks about what to avoid when exercising your dog and some safe starter conditioning exercises & activities to try.

First it must be noted that before starting any exercises or significantly changing your dogs' normal activity routine, a thorough veterinarian exam & check-up (especially if you have concerns about their mobility) is absolutely essential. Having your dog perform activities or exercises that they're not used to or haven't been gradually worked up to can exacerbate and even create injuries, so ensuring they have a clean "go ahead" from your vet is imperative. It is also typically a requirement that your dog has had a full exam & suggested work-up (which could include radiographs, orthopedic assessments, bloodwork etc) done prior to a referral & appointment with a rehabilitation/conditioning specialist.

Red Flags & Warning Signs to watch for in your dog

Along with the assessment of your regular veterinarian it is important to know the "normal" for your dog and some of the "red flags" to watch for with gait & mobility so that you can identify potential issues/injuries, have them diagnosed, and start a treatment & recovery plan as soon as possible. Some warning signs to watch for are:

- Uneven weight bearing
- Tripping, stumbling, scuffing or dragging of feet
- Obvious lameness/favouring of a leg or changes in gait
- Tail swaying more to one side
- Head bobbing while walking
- Improper posture:
 - "sinking"/slouching of the hind end when standing
 - hind legs placed forward under body when standing vs back in proper "stacking" stance
 - front toes pointed outwards & to the sides, wide front limb stance, narrow front limb stance
 - back hunched upwards OR slouched/sinking
 - knees hanging to the sides when sitting (although this **can** be a lazy Newf thing)
- Reluctance to stretch/move a body part
- Obvious swelling, heat or pain to the touch of limb/muscle/joint

Do's & Don'ts

 Do 	 Don't 
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to have your dog do some physical activity every day (walking on leash for 2-5 minutes OR doing some simple in-house exercises count!) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go for prolonged periods of little to no exercise/crate rest (unless directed to do so by a veterinarian)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make controlled leash walks part of your dog's regular exercise regime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substitute backyard zoomies, hard running or fetch for controlled leash walks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Master the Walk</i> ensure you and your dog have mastered a continuous, controlled, leash walk. This means walking at a steady pace (set by you), while maintaining complete control of your dog who is walking steadily at your side and not pulling, stopping to sniff, becoming distracted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let your dog pull you, take control, veer side to side, stop whenever they please etc during walks.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice controlled rest with your dog after an acute sprain/strain for 24-48 hours (controlled rest = confining to the indoors with NO running, jumping, climbing. 5 minute short leash walks for bathroom breaks encouraged).* 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immobilize/crate rest your dog in a strict confinement for days after an acute sprain/strain. Short, slow & controlled leashed walks for bathroom breaks are important to keep muscles & joints in motion. **
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide as much traction on your floors, both indoors & out (including stairs) to prevent slips & falls. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have your dog walk regularly on slippery floors especially when going up/down stairs. Use carpet runners, non slip booties etc if needed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep your dog's nails trimmed back regularly & fur around paw pads trimmed to help with traction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage your dog to be a "weekend warrior"; exercising little to never during the week, then having them run, swim, climb, hike at 150mph on weekends
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always approach new exercises positively, slowly & safely and know when it's looking like your dog is struggling, stressed or fatigued & stop. Conditioning is about slow controlled movements, the slower the better! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes too many changes or start new exercises all at once. Even little exercise changes/additions can be really challenging for some dogs - limit new things to 1-2 per week. Conditioning is not Rally or competitive - never rush through exercises.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Again, slow & steady – the goal in conditioning is to have the desired limbs/muscles participate in every step of the movement. When walking, slow down your walk, even if it's painstakingly slow, to ensure equal, even & complete placement & weight bearing of each limb on the ground 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rush! Slow & steady results in better success, benefit & understanding for your dog.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only attempt exercises to which you are able to quickly lend physical support to help prevent falls & trips and assist your dog in completing or safely stopping an exercise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempt exercises that you know you cannot assist your dog through should they need physical support- especially giant breeds like Newfies because holding up 120+ lbs in a pinch isn't always a breeze!

*Acute lameness/favoring of a limb that doesn't not resolve within 24-48 hours of rest should be seen by a veterinarian, sooner if you suspect is it more than a simple sprain/strain.



** If your dog is physically unable to a walk short distance for a bathroom break or is extremely painful when attempting, seek immediate veterinary attention

Conditioning Exercises and Activities:

It's always best to start with a "warm-up", some stretches, then move onto more specific muscle work & strengthening. The following exercises are listed in this order.

Legend:  Strength & muscle building  Co-ordination & proprioception  Stretching & flexibility

1) Varied surface, inclines & curb exercises during walks :

<p>Varied Surface walking is walking on surfaces other than level sturdy pavement/cement/ground. Surfaces like sand, pea gravel, gravel, thick natural or rubber mulch have more instability & bounce/give to them, making hind end, core & front end muscles of the body work harder to maintain steady control & balance while walking.</p> <p>Try 3-5 minutes, 2-3 times a week</p>	
<p>Incline walking up & down hills, ensuring there is good traction, is a great way to build front end (going downhill) & back end (going up hill) strength, as well as core strength.</p> <p>Try 3-5 minutes 2-3 times a week</p>	
<p>Curb Exercises: when walking straight down a sidewalk, walk closely to the curb and have your dog step down sideways off the curb, walk a few strides, then have them step sideways back up. Do the same on your way back or cross the street so that both left & right sides have to do both the "up" and the "down" work.</p> <p>Try 5 Curb Step-up-&-downs, per left & right side 3-5 times a week</p>	

2) Stretches :

<p>Step Stretch: Have your dog put their two front feet on a sturdy elevated surface, no higher than 8-12 inches to start. Have them hold this stance for 5-10 seconds, then return to level ground. Once your dog is comfortable with this height you can start increasing the height, no more than 8-12 inches at a time.</p> <p>Try this exercise 5x holding for 5-10 seconds, 3-5x per week.</p>	 	
<p>Cookie Stretch of the Ribs: With your dog in proper stacking stance, use treats & lure their head & neck to bend towards their ribs, holding the stretch for 5-7 seconds. Repeat on their opposite side.</p> <p>Try this stretch 5x per side, holding 5-7 seconds each time, 3-5 times per week.</p>		

Belly Lift: With your dog in proper stacking stance, tickle, rub or gently put pressure upwards on their belly till they arch their back upwards. You can either do this continuous for 60 seconds, or have them hold this stretch/lift for 5-10 seconds, and do 5 repetitions.

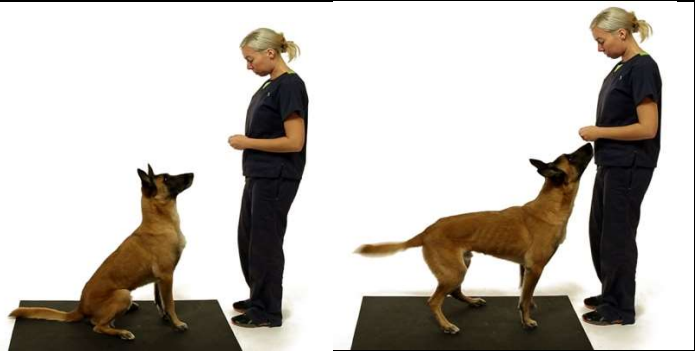
Try this exercise 3-5x per week.



3) Sit to Stands 🐾:

These can work just like squats do for humans, but they must be done with a proper sit in order to be beneficial. On a surface with good traction, have your dog sit squarely & symmetrically, meaning knees stay vertical (not splayed out to the side, or tipping inward). Then, ask them to stand, slow & controlled, pushing themselves up to a standing position.

Try this 5-10x, 3-5 times per week.



4) 3 Legged Stand & Elevated 3 Legged Stand 🐾:

With your dog standing in proper stacking stance on a surface with good traction, lift up one leg carefully & slowly and hold for 5-10 seconds. Repeat for each leg. Once your dog is comfortable with a level ground 3 legged stance, you can try elevating both front OR both back legs using a step, stool, chair or inflated K9 fitness disc and lifting one of the leg at a time, holding for 5-10 seconds per leg.

Try this 5-10x per leg, 3-5x per week.



5) Cavalettis 🐾:

Using 2x4's or dollar store plastic crates & broom handles, create 3-5 cavaletti rails, spacing them at an appropriate distance to allow for a single step between rails. The height should be at a low level allowing the dog to clear the rails consistently.

Try doing 20 rails total, 3-5x per week



6) Figure 8's 🐾:

Walk your dog around two objects or cones at a speed that encourages weight bearing. The distance between the two points and the speed of the walking can be modified based on the desired result.

Try 5-10 figure 8's, 3-5x per week.



7) Side & Backward Stepping 🐾:

Side Stepping: Standing on one side of your dog (facing towards them), slowly take steps towards your dog in order to encourage the dog to move in a sideways manner. It may help to use a command such as "side" or "side step" and praise/reward when the dog takes steps sideways. Start with 6-10 feet in both directions and gradually increase the distance, or repeat 5 times.









Backward stepping: Standing in front of your dog encourage them to walk backward by either luring them with a treat, gently walking toward/nudging them, or by gently pulling their collar/leash backward with a supportive arm under their belly. Trying this in a hallway works well, and sometimes having one of their sides close to a wall helps for guidance as well. Start with 6-10 feet at a time.

Try these exercises 5x each, 3-5 times per week.



8) Instability Work 🐾:

Instability work refers to exercising using surfaces that are unstable, which requires your dog to work their muscles harder to maintain balance which also helps improve coordination. Below are a few safe exercises for giant dogs like Newfs to try on unstable surfaces. For Newfs and other giant breeds, it is not recommended to use equipment any higher than 8-12 inches off the ground for safety of the dog and owner, and because most conditioning goals can be achieved without the use of large/tall equipment.

<p>Mattress Walking: Using one or more orthopedic dog beds, a mattress, couch cushions or an inflatable mattress walk your dog, on leash, over the mattress for 2-5 minutes. Ensure your pace is slow enough so that your dog is placing and bearing weight on each leg evenly.</p> <p><i>Try this for 2-5min, 3-5x per week</i></p>	
<p>• Mattress Exercises: with your dog on the mattress try;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having them stand in stacking stance, and hold the pose for 2 minutes at a time. • Standing in stacking stance, try the 3 legged stand, lifting one paw up at a time and holding for 5-10 seconds per paw. • 5-10 sit to stands <p><i>Try any of the above exercises 3-5x per week</i></p>	  
<p>Balance Discs</p> <p>These discs are rubber/synthetic canine fitness equipment that you inflate & use for instability work. You can use just one, having either the front or back feet on the disc or you can use two and have front feet on one, back feet on the other (if the disc is L or XL). Exercises you can try on these include;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • step-stretch • holding-stance with either two front paws up on disc OR two back paws on one disc, OR 2 front paws on one disc & 2 back legs on another disc (if using 2 discs) • 3-legged stance <p><i>Try any of the above exercises 3-5x per week</i></p>	   

9) Swimming & Hiking

Swimming is an excellent full body work out for a dog, working the hind end, front end and core muscle groups and for most Newfs it's something they were born to do. It is not recommended however that any dog swims after an acute injury, in particular knee ligament injuries & elbow injuries. The force from kicking & paddling in the water is tremendous work for the hind & fore limb muscles, and puts a lot of strain on knee & elbow joints. If your dog has had or does have a knee or elbow injury, be sure to get the all-clear from your veterinarian before they plunge into the water. For the healthy Newf and those given the all clear; plunge ahead into incorporating

swimming into your regular exercise routine, and consider water rescue training for an all-around body, mind & team work exercise!

****Tip: Many canine physiotherapy facilities have indoor pools your dog can use during inclement weather.***

Hiking is another great past time to consider to amp-up you and your dog's exercise regime. Many moderate and some easy hiking trails have various inclines, surfaces and obstacles to challenge your dog and provide a well-rounded work-out.

The Value of a CCRP (Certified Canine Rehabilitation Practitioner), their team and a Physiotherapy/Rehabilitation Centre

Knowledge is power, but knowledge & know-how from an expert team is best. The best way to have the most catered programme specific to your goals for your dog and their limitations & abilities is to seek & request a referral to a Veterinarian CCRP (Certified Canine Rehabilitation Practitioner) & rehabilitation/conditioning centre through your regular veterinarian. This is especially important if your dog has an injury or history of an injury, has been fairly inactive/strictly rested for weeks to months, is a puppy or a geriatric, or if they have any other health concerns to which they have exercise constraints. Rehabilitation specialists have extensive knowledge and training in canine rehabilitation, conditioning & fitness. They can assess your dog's gait, range of motion of each limb & joint, measure muscle mass and pinpoint areas of injury, sprain, strain and weakness. Veterinarian CCRP's often have or have access to specialized therapeutic equipment & treatments such as: under water treadmill, cold laser therapy, TENS therapy, therapeutic ultrasound, acupuncture and chiropractic therapy. Along with a full assessment, catered exercise programme, +/- underwater treadmill & therapeutic treatments, your veterinarian CCRP & staff are there for you and your dog to answer questions & provide feedback, monitor progress, make programme adjustments if needed, offer/demonstrate alternate ways to complete exercises and ultimately pave the road to success to achieve your dog's fitness goals.

The first step to take towards meeting with a veterinarian CCRP & rehabilitation/conditioning/fitness centre is to contact your regular veterinarian. Most facilities require a referral from your regular veterinarian, after a proper physical exam +/- additional work-up (if warranted/recommended) has been performed.

A special thanks to Gilmour Road Veterinary Services for providing information, pictures, feedback & guidance

Links:

- Gilmour Road Veterinary Services:
<http://guelphcompanionanimalrehab.ca>
- Help 'em up Harness:
<https://helpemup.com>
- FitPAWS:
<https://fitpawsusa.com>