

Toys and Puzzles for Your Pet

Puzzle toys are versatile and can not only slow down fast eaters but create mental exercise. They can be fun and stimulating, tiring the pet out by working the brain. Puzzle toys can be a distraction for pets when left alone or entertainment when you need them occupied. You can teach your pet to self-soothe with a toy in a specific location, reducing anxiety by offering a safe, comforting space for a potentially overwhelmed pet. Choosing specific enrichment toys for your pet is an investment in their overall health and well-being. Many products are easily found in local stores or on pet product websites, or you can make them yourself.

Snuffle mats and activity mats

These easy-to-use mats are made of fleece or fabric strips on perforated backing. They are generally easy to clean as they can often be laundered. They encourage natural instincts of sniffing, seeking and foraging behaviors. Snuffle mats have no “solution” and can offer meals in a more species-normal manner and slow the eating process down. Snuffle mats are stationary and can be used for pets with mobility restrictions, and are easily elevated if needed. Alternatively, activity mats have varying degrees of difficulty and involve solving puzzles to source the kibble or treats.



Stuffable toys to lick and chew

Toys made to be filled or stuffed can be used to dispense meals or treats, utilized for self-soothing, training, handling, or distraction/entertainment when left alone. There are many recipes that can add variety and the difficulty can be changed with different ingredients, layering and freezing.

Examples: Kong®, West Paw® Toppl®, Qwizl® and Tux®, PetSafe™ busy buddy® Twist ‘n Treat™



Considerations and cautions in the use of food dispensing toys or products

- Multiple dog households should closely monitor toys to ensure no guarding is occurring
 - Ask your behavior clinician about the appropriateness of toys and any special set up if your dog is known to guard resources from people or other pets
- Closely monitor your pet when introducing any new toy or product to make sure they are not frustrated, stressed or trying to ingest pieces of the product.
- Choose the best toy for your pet and the level of engagement you are seeking — some pets are easily frustrated if the task is too difficult; if too easy, they may lose interest. Some toys may excite and ramp your pet up rather than soothe or calm.
- Consider the material used and durability of the toy you choose and monitor often for damage
 - Ingestion of pieces can be an emergency leading to choking or intestinal blockages requiring surgical intervention
 - Some hard materials can be noisy, scratch furniture or floors, or can develop sharp edges if chewed
 - Is it a material you find easy to clean?
 - Is it dishwasher safe?

Lick mats

Lick mats and similar products offer distraction and positive reinforcement during handling for health and husbandry care by providing long-lasting, lickable food. These tools are made of a flexible silicone (or similar material) and can have suction cups or a flat surface that clings to a wall in the bathtub, the refrigerator or cabinet door. The surface pattern and depth determine the amount, type of food and how long it will last. Simply spread wet food or any soft treat across the surface and into crevices. Pureed vegetables or baby food can provide a low calorie option.

If you would like to make your pet's licking session with the mat last longer, try using stickier types of food, like peanut butter, cream cheese, braunschweiger, marshmallow fluff or squeeze cheese. You can also extend the licking time by preparing a mat and then sticking it in the freezer.

Examples: sodapup® E-mats, Best Buddy Dog Products LICKIMAT® and LICKIT BUDDY®, Chase 'N Chomp Sticky Bone, Neater Pets™ Neat-Lik™ Mat Slow Feed Licking Mat



Kibble dispensing toys

Kibble dispensing toys provide physical and mental enrichment while dispensing dry food or treats. They are a great alternative to traditional bowl feeding as they can hold entire meals, slow down fast eaters, increase metabolic output for overweight pets, and maintain mental engagement for older patients.

Examples: Kong® Wobbler™, RuffWear® Gnawt-A-Rock™, PetSafe™ busy buddy® Kibble Nibble™, Planet Dog® Snoop and Mazee Ball, OurPets Buster Food Cube®



Slow-feeder bowls

Slow-feeder bowls are partitioned in varying sizes and patterns that physically prevent pets from eating food too quickly. They can provide beginner enrichment for pets in an easy-to-manage way for owners. They can be used by putting in dry kibble or can be made more difficult by freezing with water-softened kibble or other edible additives.

Examples: Outward Hound® Fun Feeder® Slo-Bowls, Green Interactive Feeder, Neater Pets™ Neater Slow Feeder



Interactive toys and dog “puzzles” - Strategy & snack toys

If your pet needs an extra challenge, strategy toys may be a good fit. Puzzles to solve can be as simple as hide and seek plush toys to varying levels of smart puzzle games where your pet needs to “unlock” parts to reveal the treat, slide objects, open drawers or move objects. Strategy toys can keep senior dogs mentally active without the need for physical exertion.

Examples: Nina Ottosson® puzzle games, Trixie® Pet Products Activity Strategy Games, Frisco™ Hide & Seek or ZippyPaws® Burrows

