

# Dog Toys and How to Use Them

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## **“Safe” Toys**

There are many factors that contribute to the safety or danger of a toy. Many of those factors, however, are completely dependent upon your dog's size, activity level and personal preference. Another factor to be considered is the environment in which your dog spends his time. Although we can't guarantee your dog's enthusiasm or his safety with any specific toy, we can offer the following guidelines.

## **Be Cautious**

The things that are usually the most attractive to dogs are often the very things that are the most dangerous. Dog-proof your home by checking for the following items: string, ribbon, rubber bands, children's toys, pantyhose and anything else that could be ingested.

Toys should be appropriate for your dog's current size. Balls and other toys that are too small can easily be swallowed or become lodged in your dog's mouth or throat.

Avoid or alter any toys that aren't “dog-proof” by removing ribbons, strings, eyes or other parts that could be chewed and/or ingested. Avoid any toy that starts to break into pieces or have pieces torn off. You should also avoid “tug-of-war” toys, unless they'll be used between dogs, not between people and dogs.

Ask your veterinarian about which rawhide toys are safe and which aren't. Unless your veterinarian says otherwise, chewables like hooves, pig's ears and rawhides, should be supervision-only goodies. Very hard rubber toys are safer and last longer.

Take note of any toy that contains a “squeaker” buried in its center. Your dog may feel that he must find and destroy the squeak-source and could ingest it, in which case squeaking objects should be “supervision only” toys.

Check labels for child safety, as a stuffed toy that's labeled as safe for children under three years old doesn't contain dangerous fillings. Problem fillings include things like nutshells and polystyrene beads, however, even a “safe” stuffing isn't truly digestible.

Remember that soft toys are not indestructible, but some are sturdier than others. Soft toys should be machine washable.

## **Toys We Recommend**

### **Active Toys:**

- Very hard rubber toys like Nylabone- type products and Kong-type products. These are available in a variety of shapes and sizes and are fun for chewing and for carrying around.
- "Rope" toys that are usually available in a "bone" shape with knotted ends.
- Tennis balls make great dog toys, but keep an eye out for any that could be chewed through and discard them.

### **Distraction Toys:**

- Kong-type toys, especially when filled with broken-up treats, or even better, a mixture of broken-up treats and peanut butter. The right size Kong can keep a puppy or dog busy for hours. Only by chewing diligently can your dog access the treats, and then only in small bits – very rewarding! Double-check with your veterinarian about whether or not you should give peanut butter to your dog.
- "Busy box" toys are large rubber cubes with hiding places for treats. Only by moving the cube around with his nose, mouth and paws can your dog access the goodies.

### **Comfort Toys:**

- Soft stuffed toys are good for several purposes, but aren't appropriate for all dogs. For some dogs, the stuffed toy should be small enough to carry around. For dogs that want to shake or "kill" the toy, it should be the size that "prey" would be for that size dog (mouse-size, rabbit-size or duck-size).
- Dirty laundry, like an old t-shirt, pillowcase, towel or blanket, can be very comforting to a dog, especially if it smells like you! Be forewarned that the item could be destroyed by industrious fluffing, carrying and nosing.

### **Get the Most Out of Toys!**

- Rotate your dog's toys weekly by making only four or five toys available at a time. Keep a variety of types easily accessible. If your dog has a huge favorite, like a soft "baby," you should probably leave it out all the time, or risk the wrath of your dog!
- Provide toys that offer a variety of uses – at least one toy to carry, one to "kill," one to roll and one to "baby."
- "Hide and Seek" is a fun game for dogs to ply. "Found" toys are often much more attractive than a toy which is blatantly introduced. Making an interactive game out of finding toys or treats is a good "rainy-day" activity for your dog, using up energy without the need for a lot of space.
- The "box trick" can be a way to redirect the behavior of a dog who likes to seek out shoes or other "wrong toys" to chew. Fill a cardboard box with several toys and bones and tuck away under a coffee table or other out-of-the-way spot. Your dog can have the fun of "stealing" but without chewing inappropriate items.
- Many of your dog's toys should be interactive. Interactive play is very important for your dog because he needs active "people time." By focusing on a specific task, like repeatedly returning a ball, Kong or Frisbee, or playing "hide and seek" with treats or toys, your dog can expel pent-up mental and physical energy in a limited amount of time and space. This greatly reduces stress due to confinement, isolation and/or boredom. For young, high- energy and untrained dogs, interactive play also offers an opportunity for socialization and helps them learn about appropriate and inappropriate behavior with people and with other animals, like jumping up or being mouthy.