

Physical Rehab for Pets

Debilitating disease, accidents and injuries drastically affect a pet's quality of life and leave owners feeling like helpless bystanders. There are important ways, however, that owners can significantly improve their pet's emotional outlook and to aid in healing process of their companion.

Case in point

Sandy, a 12-year old golden retriever and 4Paws social therapy dog, had extensive surgery for mast-cell tumors (malignant cancer). The surgeon removed a circle of skin from his leg and knee area that was some 6 inches wide, or about 20 square inches of tissue.

Luckily, there were no skin grafts, but neither was there enough skin left to comfortably bend his knee. He walked stiff-legged, hiking up his leg with his hip muscles instead of using his gluts to bend and lift his leg and paw.

Need for physical therapy

Sandy needed to regain range of motion, muscle tone and confidence. So he met with Dr. Jackie Woelz (pronounced wells,) the Director of Rehabilitation Services at the Small Animal Clinic at the UC Davis Veterinary School. She demonstrated a number of techniques to Sandy's owner that would also help any older dog with painful joints, muscle atrophy, hind leg weakness, or who is recovering from injury or disease.

Why physical therapy

The goal of physical rehab is keeping pets as strong, mobile and pain-free as possible. Medication can help with pain, but not with regaining movement or strength. With the exercises and tips from Dr. Woelz, Sandy made a full recovery and even ahead of schedule for a dog his age. The following are some of Dr. Woelz's suggestions for dogs with hind leg weakness, who occasionally drag their back paws or stumble, or who are recovering from surgery or injury.

1. Take a garden hose and make a series of "s" patterns. Then walk your dog over hose. The hose will force a do to think about not only lifting his leg by using his gluts, but placing his paw correctly on the ground as well. (Large sticks or walking through ivy encourage better leg lifts and foot placement, too.)
2. Massaging a dog's paws will help the brain engage with the paws and the neurotransmitters stimulated. It's also another way to check for burrs or foxtails that become buried between pads and that can affect a dog's gait.

3. Keeping nails short and removing excess hair between pads is very important. Long hair that curls under the pads reduces traction and increases the risk of slipping. Long nails force the dog to shift his weight backward instead distributing weight evenly over his feet.

4. By gently spreading the back legs an inch or two when he stops to sniff on a walk will help maintain better balance. Move one of his legs with your foot or hand to the side so his stance looks more of an “A” or an “H” rather than that a “V”.

5. When a dog moves backward, the dog’s brain is forced to purposefully communicate with the legs. Find a narrow space—between a sofa and coffee table, for example—and use a treat catch the dogs’ attention. Then slowly move forward so the dog walks backward.

Dr. Woelz encourages physical exercise after surgery but to do so gradually with very short walks at the outset. Make sure your dog has plenty of time to sniff and stop so he doesn’t overuse another joint by compensating for pain. Swimming is also good exercise, but owners need to understand the limitations and risks of water therapy.

“Swimming is three times more intense than walking,” says Dr. Woelz. “A 2-minute swim is equivalent to a 6 minute, non-stop walk.” She suggests that dogs walk in hip deep water instead so the dog can rest and not jeopardize his recovery. Thrashing or exuberant play in water will do far more harm than good. And after surgery, dogs should avoid any water until an incision is completely healed.

What else?

Body massage is extremely important for pets and Dr. Woelz suggests a weekly massage not only for the physical benefits, but spiritual rewards as well. It is an opportunity for pets and owners to de-stress and to nurture their relationship in a non-verbal way. (Regular massage also helps owners locate changes in the dog’s body such as suspicious lumps, weight gain or tender areas.)