



FEATURE

Canine Conditioning

Canine conditioning is essentially a fitness program for healthy dogs which improves global strength, flexibility, fine motor skills, gross motor skills, coordination and efficiency of movement. This is in contrast to canine rehabilitation which is individualised, targeted exercise that has been prescribed to strengthen, reduce pain and assist recovery from injury or surgery. However, the goals of both conditioning and rehabilitation can be similar.

A conditioning program can be used to improve the general fitness and quality of life of any dog, provided it is started at the appropriate level for your dog's health, age, breed, exposure to exercise and current fitness. For example, the conditioning program level and pace for a 9-year-old sedentary pet Dachshund will be very different to the program for a 2-year-old Kelpie who is on a flyball team.

We're excited to see how many people have taken conditioning seriously since we first ran courses around 10 years ago, so this article is foundation-level for those new to the concept. Next month's article will have more advanced exercises for those who have already done conditioning. Keep in mind, though, that even seasoned dogs can sneak in little cheats over time, so you might want to check your dog's form with these "back to basics" exercises.

What are the benefits of conditioning for a dog?

- Increases cardiovascular fitness.
- Increases stamina and endurance for physical activity.
- Improves muscle function for smooth effective movement and to support the joints.
- Improves health of the joints e.g. lubricates cartilage & prevents stiffness.
- Is a source of enrichment (learning, stimulation & enjoyment).
- Stimulates the brain to coordinate movements in the correct pattern.
- Keeps muscles, tendons, bones, ligaments, joint surfaces, nerves & fascia healthy.
- Decreases anxiety & promotes a calm feeling.
- Improves mood by stimulating endorphins.
- Increases reaction times e.g. being able to turn quickly to avoid unexpected obstacles.
- Promotes healthy restorative sleep.
- Teaches the muscles surrounding the spine to work effectively at supporting it & providing a good solid foundation for other movements to occur.
- Maintaining a healthy weight, which in turn prevents osteoarthritis developing & prolongs life.
- Improves your bond with your dog.
- If your dog is a working breed or a sporting dog, conditioning can significantly improve their stamina, performance and reduce their risk of injury.

Which dogs can benefit?

Any healthy dog can participate, with variations made for the breed, age, motivation and current and future activity levels. We always use force-free methods in our Physiotherapy practice, which means finding a way to motivate the dog towards something they want or enjoy. It helps a great deal to encourage your dog to perform the exercises using something they love, such as food, a ball or toy. If using food, ensure you take any treats out of their daily food allowance so you're not over feeding them. If they're not particularly treat-orientated, you can try doing the exercises just before mealtimes, using small parts of their meal to tempt them.

When we say "any healthy dog", we mean a dog that is bright, eating and drinking normally, toileting normally, is currently sound and is not recovering from surgery or acute illness. If you are unsure if your dog should or can do the following exercises, please see your veterinarian first and ask their opinion.



Above: Exercise 1a. The Stack and 2-Minute Hold



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Which dogs can benefit?

A note about senior dogs. Older dogs can vary greatly in their ability and willingness to exercise and it can really give some of them a second wind! So, if they're healthy and willing, give it a try. If they aren't enjoying it or are finding it difficult, don't keep pushing them. It's worth asking the Vet to check them over, in case there's a physical reason for this.

How often should I do the conditioning exercises?

Core Principles:

1. None of these exercises should hurt your dog at all. Ever. The "keep pushing" mindset we humans have when trying to improve our fitness does not apply to dogs.
2. Never force your dog into doing an exercise or into a particular position. If they aren't doing the exercise asked of them, let them take a few seconds, "reload" and try again. If it's not working:
 - Try a different way of asking / showing the dog what we'd like them to do.
 - There may be a legitimate reason for refusing the exercise such as weakness, stiffness, a feeling of instability or pain. Always bear this in mind.
 - They may be fatigued. This can happen surprisingly quickly.
 - They're not motivated by your "reward"! Try a higher-value reward.
3. Start low and slow with 2-3 different exercises, once a day, for 5-6 days a week.
4. The number of repetitions needed is decided by how many times the dog can repeat the exercise before they start losing form, i.e. not performing the exercise correctly. This could only be 2 repetitions, or it could be 20. Repeating an exercise that is being done incorrectly can cause injury, put strain on other parts of the body and reinforce unwanted movement patterns. Quality is always better than quantity.
5. Don't increase the complexity or difficulty of an exercise until they've mastered the current level. This means doing 20 repetitions correctly with no loss of form.
6. If your dog just isn't getting it, move on to a different exercise. Don't get frustrated with them - it's meant to be fun for your both! You can try again another day.
7. If your dog consistently has issues performing an exercise or getting into/holding a particular position, there's likely an issue that needs investigating by your Vet and/or Physio. Avoid doing this particular exercise if this is the case.

Want to try some?

Here are some foundation-level exercises to try, which are useful if you haven't done any conditioning with your dog before. However, seasoned dogs should also give these a try as they can sneak in little cheats over time so there's no harm going back to basics to check they're not losing form.

This is what you'll need to complete all the following exercises, plus some treats!

Purpose-made Equipment:	Substitute if you don't have this equipment:
Fitness foam balance pad (TPE foam). Size usually 50cm x 40cm x 6cm.	A thin cushion wide enough for your dog to stand with 2 front paws on it.
Cavalette poles set at hock height.	4 broom handles or garden sticks of similar length, propped on top of something that raises them to your dog's ankle height.
An adjustable height training platform.	A low step, kitchen stool, or for large/giant breeds, a dining chair with a firm, non-slip surface on it.
Sport balance disc / air cushion.	Balance discs can be purchased cheaply from large budget-brand shops.



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Exercise 1a:

This is a good screener for your dog; if your dog can't hold this on flat ground for 2 minutes, do not progress - see your vet and/or physio.

THE STACK & 2 MINUTE HOLD (see photo on page 13)

A stack is the position that you see show dogs in:

standing tall, proud, head up looking forward, with feet parallel, back straight and their hocks vertical (see photo).

- Use a treat or target to get them to hold this position as long as possible.
- If dogs are having trouble with this, they often step forward with 1 leg or sit down. Let them have a break for a minute or two, then try again. Note how long they're able to hold it before they do this.
- When they can hold for 2 minutes, progress to exercise 2.

Exercise 1b:

THE STACK WITH FRONT PAWS ON FOAM PAD/ CUSHION & HOLD (see image right)

- As above however stand their front paws on a fitness foam pad, foam cushion or balance/wobble disc if they already have a basic level of fitness.
- Aim to hold for 2 minutes.

The next two exercises can be done even if your dog hasn't yet progressed to 1b.

Exercise 2:

OBSTACLES (see image bottom right)

- Slowly walk your dog over 4 poles across their path. Poles should be the length of your dog's body apart, placed equally.
- 1 lap is over the 4 poles and back again to the start position.
- The goal is for them to step over the 4 poles cleanly without knocking them. When they can do this for 5 laps, they can progress to the more advanced exercise in next month's edition.

Exercise 3:

DROP TO STAND (see image below)





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Exercise 3:

DROP TO STAND

- Get your dog to 'drop' (or lie down) with their front feet on a foam pad/wobble cushion and their back feet on a yoga mat.
- Simulating the angle that your dog needs to jump, stretch a treat in front of your dog so they go from 'drop' to standing.
- You want your dog to look a bit like Superman going 'up, up & away'.
- Make sure the stand position is a stretch forward position, with their back flat and a straight line from nose to tail.
- Repeat up to 30 times, stopping if your dog loses form.
- If your dog doesn't drop/lie down, you can do this from a sitting position, ensuring their back feet stay planted to the floor the whole time – no hopping or stepping forwards.

As these are beginner exercises, next month will be Part Two, where we will have more advanced progressions for you to try. Please consult the physiotherapist if your dog is having difficulties with these exercises.

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Animal Physio at Whole Family Health

We are all about a pet living their best life.

Dr Helen Nicholson has a PhD in Animal Physiotherapy and is a world-leading expert in a wide range of modalities such as laser treatment, hyperbaric oxygen therapy, underwater treadmill, wheelchair fitting, exercise and conditioning programs, rehabilitation, massage and manual therapy.

Emma Duffy has an Honours degree in Physiotherapy and over 20 years' experience in the field. She has trained in animal physiotherapy techniques, hydrotherapy, acupuncture and canine massage, and works closely with Dr Nicholson.

We are registered with AHPRA (Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency) and fully insured.

Contact: theteam@wholefamilyhealth.com.au or (02) 9833 3363, if you have questions or you'd like to discuss a case. We're based in St Mary's NSW however we do Zoom consultations.

See our videos on: www.wholefamilyhealth.com.au and Facebook/Instagram.



Image (above): Exercise 3 - Finish position.

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You will roll over to the corporate rates upon your next renewal. Conditions apply.

Not a Qantas Club member, but would like to become one?

Join through DOGS NSW to take advantage of the corporate rates & benefits!

For more information: contact Kerry Christofi on (02) 9834 0217 or email on kchristofi@dogsnsw.org.au. Please provide your DOGS NSW member number.

