

FAMILY & RELATIONSHIPS

12 Ways to Keep Your Dog Entertained Indoors

From training to toys, here's how to help confined canines conquer boredom

By Matt Alderton, AARP

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From illnesses that keep you homebound and injuries that limit your mobility to meetings, errands and appointments that consume your calendar, there are many reasons you might not be able to walk [your dog](#) on any given day — including seasonal hazards like [hitter.co.uk](#), salt-laden sidewalks and black ice, all of which can make it miserable, if not dangerous, to walk the dog in wintertime.

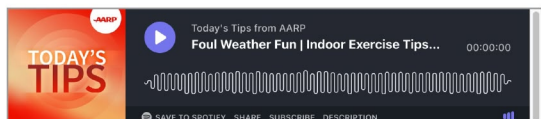
If you have a high-energy pet, those missed walks could be problematic, says Lorraine Rhoads, senior director of Health and Safety at Dogtopia, which operates more than 270 dog day care centers across the United States and Canada.

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Studies show that dogs who have a good amount of exercise and mental stimulation live longer and are "better canine citizens," Rhoads says. "They're better family members at home. They have better manners. And they're not going to be as interested in investigating things they shouldn't ingest or chew on."

Alongside chewing, clues that [your dog](#) isn't getting enough activity include excessive barking or whining, hyperactivity and restlessness, repetitive or obsessive behaviors like tail-chasing or licking, increased aggression, panting or overexcitement and weight gain, Rhoads says.



So, what do you do when outdoor exercise is limited? Here are a dozen good ideas:

1. Tire them with training

"Dogs love to learn. Focusing and learning for them is really exhausting," says celebrity [dog trainer](#) and Rover.com expert Nicole Ellis. "You don't need to do crazy training. It could be fun things like teaching your dog to shake, high five or spin in a circle. You can find free videos for these online. Just 5 to 15 minutes can make a world of difference. You'll create a stronger bond with your dog while also tiring them out."



2. Let them lick

"Licking is actually calming and relaxing to dogs," says Ellis, who suggests spreading peanut butter or yogurt on a licking mat. Online retailers such as Chewy.com, Amazon and Walmart sell different brands of mats in the \$9 to \$18 price range. "We can stick them on the wall or on the floor and let our dogs lick and calm down."

Instead of a licking mat, you can also use a Kong or Kong-like toy that you fill with something like peanut butter or yogurt, says Ellis, who suggests freezing the toy to make them last longer.



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3. Play hide-and-seek

[Dogs like](#) walks not only because they exercise their legs, but also because they exercise their noses, according to Ellis, who suggests playing hide-and-seek with treats or kibble. "Hold your dog and put a treat a foot away so he can see you hiding it, then let him go get it," instructs Ellis. She says you can gradually move treats farther away and put them in more creative hiding spots — on a table or bookcase, for example. If necessary, it's OK to crate your pup while you hide treats, she adds. "When dogs get to use their innate desire to sniff, it really tires them out."

Forage-friendly snuffle mats — made of looped material in which to conceal treats — are another option for dogs who like sniffing. "You can buy them online or make a simple one at home by using an old rag or towel and twisting it up with the treats hidden inside," says Shaina Denny, cofounder and CEO of Dogdrop, a provider of on-demand dog day care. "It's like a treasure hunt."



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4. Trade out their toys

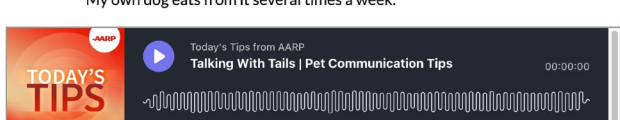
You can buy brain games for dogs online, including treat-dispensing toys and puzzles. "It keeps them moving and keeps them thinking. They kind of forget about us while they're busy figuring out how to get these delicious items out," Ellis says.

You don't have to spend big on fancy toys. Even cheap grocery-store toys can be a welcome distraction. "I like putting out a basket full of toys, but changing them out regularly so they're always fresh and interesting," says Rhoads, who recommends designating "special" toys that only come out on snow days or when walks must be skipped.

5. Gamify meals

If treat-dispensing toys are a hit, you can take the concept even further by using them at [mealtimes](#), suggests certified dog trainer Annie Grossman, author of *How to Train Your Dog with Love + Science*. "Make mealtime more of a puzzle," Grossman advises. "Work-to-eat" toys let dogs chew, nudge and problem-solve to earn their food. In my experience, putting most — or all — of a dog's daily rations into these devices can ease separation anxiety, curb destructive chewing and improve overall well-being."

"If your dog eats kibble, you can serve an entire meal this way," Grossman says. "Suddenly dinner takes 10 times longer, which is healthier and more satisfying. My own dog eats from it several times a week."



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6. Go fetch

Fetch is many a dog's favorite game — and it can easily be played indoors with a tennis ball, according to Rhoads, who suggests playing in a long hallway or, even better, on a staircase. "Using your staircase to go up and down will get the heart rate up and get a nice, good respiration rate," she says, adding that there are automatic fetch machines for less mobile dog owners.

If Fido isn't into tennis balls, try food, suggests Allie Bender, founder and co-owner of Pet Harmony Animal Behavior & Training in Naperville, Illinois, and coauthor of *Canine Enrichment for the Real World*. If your dog isn't naturally inclined to play fetch, it's possible to teach it, says Bender. But, she adds, if the goal is just to get them some exercise, she finds it better to use treats instead of toys. "Tossing treats down a long hallway can provide physical exercise as they're moving back and forth down the hallway and mental exercise in the form of foraging if they're having to sniff out where the treat landed."

7. Find your dog's inner cat

If your home doesn't have enough room for a proper game of fetch, try playing with a feline-inspired flirt pole, Ellis suggests. "A flirt pole is a simple but powerful enrichment tool that's like a big, dog version of a cat teaser: a long pole with a toy or lure on the end that you sweep or jiggle to encourage your dog to chase," she says. "It taps into natural chase instincts while giving your pup a burst of high-energy exercise without needing a lot of space — perfect for days when walks aren't possible."

There are several ways to use a flirt pole indoors, depending on your space, according to Bender. "I typically ask a dog to wait, then let them chase the toy in a wide circle, catch it, play tug with it if they enjoy that, then ask them to drop it and, finally, scatter treats on the ground for them to forage while I reset," she says. "I recommend going in one direction per round — clockwise or counterclockwise — as sharp turns can cause knee injuries. Similarly, lifting the toy off the ground to elicit a lot of jumping is hard on the joints and can cause injury."

If space is limited, "you may choose to run with the flirt pole so your dog can chase it that way instead of you standing in the middle and turning it around you," Bender adds. "You could also move just the rope part in a line instead of having to get the whole toy involved if you're extra tight on space."

8. Take a walk — on a dog-safe treadmill

Although they're not cheap and often take up a lot of room, pet treadmills can be great for large breeds that need lots of activity, according to Rhoads, who, for safety reasons, recommends models without electric motors. "A dog-safe treadmill is specifically designed to activate on the dog's own power," she says.

9. Try doggy day care

Dog day care isn't just for pet parents who work and travel. It's for everyone, says Rhoads. She explains that dogs at home typically take fewer than 5,000 steps in a day, whereas dogs in day care often take up to 60,000 steps in a day. Along with organic play, many day cares offer structured activities that facilitate physical and mental exercise.

"Indoor dog day care offers climate-controlled playgrounds where dogs can move freely, socialize safely and burn energy without exposure to cold, ice or salted surfaces," Rhoads says.

Adds Ellis, "When they're in a new environment and they're playing all day ... they come home exhausted."

Day care doesn't have to be an everyday affair. Just a couple of days a week can make a big difference, Rhoads says — or even a couple of hours, according to Denny, who recommends finding a day care with hourly options to use on days when walks aren't feasible.



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10. Experiment with agility

Because they exercise the mind and body simultaneously, agility courses are a favorite fixture at many dog day care facilities. Try creating your own course at home. "Can you create a tunnel between your ottoman and your couch with a blanket? Can you encourage your dog to go through and around? Can you go up and over? Those kinds of activities are really fun for both you and your dog," says Rhoads, who suggests mining social media for ideas and inspiration.

11. Buddy up

In lieu of day care, consider having another animal over for a playdate — or perhaps even adopting another dog so your pets can entertain each other. "You might also consider fostering a dog through a local shelter or rescue," suggests Ellis, who notes that some shelters pay for food and vet care. "It's a win-win. You get to help a dog find a home, and your own dog gets a friend for a few months while the weather's cold or your schedule's crazy, without you permanently taking on the responsibility of a second dog."

12. Regulate with rest

Even in winter, a surprising remedy for restless dogs is ... well, rest, Rhoads says. "Winter can disrupt normal sleep patterns," she points out. "Build intentional rest periods into the day so dogs learn when it is time to relax, not just how to stay busy. Calm enrichment followed by quiet downtime supports emotional regulation."



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Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes and The Washington Post.

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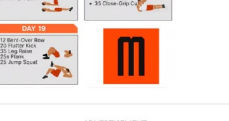
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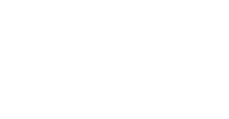
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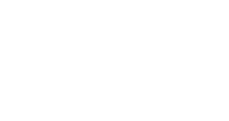
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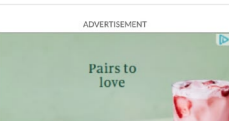
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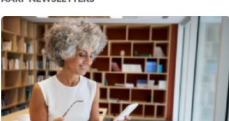
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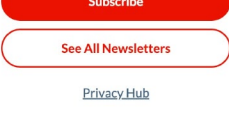
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