

Training Topic: Basket Muzzles

○ Muzzles can be a useful tool for management of aggression in some situations. They should not be used as a means of socialization. If you use a muzzle, we recommend a secure basket-style muzzle rather than the soft “sleeve” nylon types sold in many pet supply stores. A properly fitted basket muzzle permits the dog to pant and to receive food rewards while wearing it. A muzzle that interferes with your dog’s ability to pant should never be used for more than a few minutes, because of the risk of overheating and even heatstroke. Websites where muzzles can be purchased include: www.morrco.com and www.hunterpet.com. The muzzles we use in the hospital are available from www.jafcomuzzles.com.

○ Please introduce your dog to a muzzle gradually. The first step is to encourage him to eat from the muzzle while it is lying on the floor. Depending on the style of muzzle, he may be able to eat his food from it (Jafco muzzles), or he can take larger pieces of treats or lick things like peanut butter, cream cheese or squeeze cheese from the straps of a basket muzzle. Once he seems comfortable eating from the muzzle, you can begin to hold it for him to eat from it. The idea is to teach him to put his nose all the way into the muzzle, and for this, it may be most effective to smear something he can lick right inside the front of the muzzle.

The next step is to desensitize your dog to your touching the muzzle straps and moving them around. This may take a while. Watch his body language at all times for any signs of distress. If he seems uncomfortable, return to the previous step. After you have been able to handle the straps without a problem, you can pull the straps together and hold them together while he eats the food from the muzzle. Release them immediately when he finishes the food. Next, you can fasten the buckle while he eats, but again, the muzzle should be fastened only long enough for him to finish the food.

The final step is to let him eat the food smeared in the front of the muzzle, then let him continue to wear it for a few moments while you feed more peanut butter, cream cheese or squeeze cheese through the openings in the muzzle. Gradually over time you can increase the time he spends wearing the muzzle. You should continue to offer him food through the holes in the muzzle as you increase the time.

○ Dogs can hurt people and animals even while wearing a muzzle, by jumping on them or by lunging at them and hitting them with the muzzle. This is particularly true with a wire basket muzzle, and it can happen with a solid plastic muzzle like the Jafco muzzle as well. Dogs can also remove muzzles if they are persistent enough, particularly if the muzzle does not fit properly or if the straps are not tightened enough. If a dog removes a muzzle with the straps still fastened around his neck, it can be dangerous to try to unfasten the straps. Always make sure the muzzle straps are snug and secure around his neck just below his ears.

○ It is safest to remove a muzzle when your dog is distracted, especially at vet visits. For example, as you leave the hospital, you can remove the muzzle as the dog steps outside, since he will probably be interested in sights and smells, or just eager to get back into the car. Be sure there are no other dogs or people nearby before you remove the muzzle.

○ Your dog should always be actively supervised while wearing a muzzle. Dogs cannot be left muzzled while you are away, or while they are unsupervised in the yard.