

Time for Rehab

Physical therapy helps paralyzed dogs live on.

Katie Costello

You find your dog unable to walk and rush him to your veterinarian. The vet refers you to a surgeon who performs a laminectomy to repair a herniated disc in your dog's back. You are told that he stands a good chance of recovering completely, but will require a lot of patience and weeks of rehabilitation. So, what's next?

When you look for a physical therapist for your dog, Denis Marcellin-Little, DVM, American College of Veterinary Surgeons diplomate, and cofounder of the Animal Rehabilitation and Wellness Hospital, suggests choosing only a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner.

David Levine, P.T., Ph.D., a professor at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, says three types of rehabilitation help dogs after back surgery: aquatic therapy, therapeutic exercises, and gait training. All three help build strength and endurance, while the first two assist with balance and the latter with awareness of limbs and their location (proprioception).

Therapeutic exercise may include standing exercises, slow walks, stair climbing, treadmill activity, wheelbarrowing, and "dancing." Jogging, sit-to-stand exercises, pulling or carrying weights, walking and trotting across rails, and playing ball also help dogs to regain mobility. Aquatic therapy usually involves an underwater treadmill or swimming in a pool with guidance for optimal exercise of the injured limb.

The rehab period depends on the severity of your dog's impairments, says Joanna M. Freeman, B.Sc., P.T., C.S.C.S., but it generally lasts at least four to six weeks. Treatment sessions range from \$30 to \$60, depending on the injury, rehabilitation needed, and the facility's location. Most dogs require daily therapy for a few days, followed by two to three times a week for the duration of the four- to six-week period. A weekly session can be enough for maintenance and weight loss, Levine says.

According to Marcellin-Little, "Rehabilitation gives animals the best chance of recovering as fully as possible. If your dog is destined not to walk because of profound damage to the spinal cord, the therapist will help your deal with avoiding bedsores, eliminating muscle spasm, and fitting the dog in a custom ambulation cart."