

Is That Dog Toy Safe for My Pet?

The right size, materials, and design all count when it comes to ensuring your dog's safety.

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Fifty-nine percent of dog owners buy toys for their dogs, according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association's 2003-2004 Pet Owner's Survey. That's a lot of toys, and with some of them can come safety problems.

The No. 1 problem I get with dog toys is ingestion, says John Hamil, DVM, of Laguna Beach Animal Hospital. The 30-year veterinarian says owners must take care to match the size of the toy to the size of the dog. Too often, dogs swallow small toys or get them stuck in the back of their throat. A dog can open his mouth wider than the size of his throat, Hamil points out, so while a tennis ball, for example, may look big enough for your dog, if he can hold it in her mouth without any of the ball showing, he can easily swallow or choke on it.

Hamil also recommends keeping a dog's individual behavior in mind when purchasing a toy. "Some dogs hang on to one toy for five years, others chew it up in 30 minutes," he says. If your dog tends to destroy toys, give him a strong rope or leather toy that will survive her chewing. If your dog likes to cuddle or carry toys, then a plush or cloth toy is best.

Hamil warns that owners should use extra caution with squeaker toys, providing close supervision, because dogs love to rip apart the toy to find the squeaker and chew on it. He says dogs can cut their mouth on these pieces or swallow them. Instead, try leather toys. They get wet and soft when dogs play with them, and they are digestible. Hamil also recommends nylon rope toys because as the dog bites into them, the rope scrapes excess tartar away. They are also easy to clean; just throw them in the washing machine.

Key points about dog toy safety: Match the toy to fit your dog's size, activity level, and behavior.

Avoid toys with glued-on decorations, like button eyes or decals. Or, remove these pieces before you let your dog play with the toy.

Discard toys if your dog has dismantled them.