

Stretching Exercises for Your Dog

Regular stretching keeps your performance dog conditioned and ready to work or compete.

By Maryanne Dell

Routine stretching, especially before competition, is one of the most important habits to develop with a canine athlete. It's particularly essential for dogs engaged in strenuous sports, such as disc dog, agility and flyball, which can put a great deal of stress on their bodies.

However, you must stretch your dog correctly. To lessen the likelihood of injury, err on the side of caution by not stretching the body too far.

Here are three stretches that can benefit all dogs, courtesy of Debbie Gross-Saunders of Colchester, Conn., a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner who is board-certified in orthopedic physical therapy for humans and has been working with animals for about 15 years. Saunders has a doctorate in human physical therapy and an advanced master's degree in human orthopedic physical therapy.

Before performing the stretches, walk your dog, building to a trot over the course of five to 10 minutes, Saunders says. This activity should increase the dog's heart rate by 40 to 60 percent.

Next come the stretches:

Hip flexors: These muscles allow the hip to contract when the dog trots or runs. With your dog standing, gently grasp one of his back legs above the knee and slowly move the leg back, so it's extended straight out behind his body. When you feel resistance, hold the position for 15 to 30 seconds. Repeat two or three times with each leg. If your dog appears to be in pain, have his hips examined by a veterinarian.

Shoulder flexors: With your dog standing, gently grasp a front leg above the elbow and move the leg forward, as if the dog was giving a high five. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds, repeating two or three times with each front leg.

Back stretch: With the dog standing, use a treat to lure his head gently toward his tail. The dog's body should bend in a C shape. Hold for 15 to 30 seconds, repeating two or three times on each side.

You can stretch your dog in many ways. For some examples, check out Saunders' *Stretching the Performance Dog* DVD (Clean Run Productions, 2005).