

Texas Veterinary Behavior Services

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DESENSITIZATION FOR MUZZLES AND HEAD HALTERS

Training your dog to wear a muzzle and/or Gentle Leader is a relatively straightforward process. Adapting a dog to a muzzle in advance of its need aids in reducing the dog's stress when the muzzle is applied. Muzzles and Gentle Leaders are used to improve control of your dog and ensure safety for the people or animals that must be near your dog. These pieces of equipment are essential parts of behavior modification programs and are necessary for several of the exercises that may have been prescribed for your dog. The adaptation to the muzzle and the Gentle Leader follow similar steps. These steps can be completed within a few days to two weeks.

Muzzle sizes should be chosen such that the dog can open his mouth just enough to get his tongue out to pant and to be able to take food treats. Each step described below should be repeated a minimum of 15-30 times. You may have to do even more repetitions than this before your dog is **completely** comfortable with that stage, but 15-30 should be the minimum. If the dog is shying away, pulling away immediately after the treat, or pawing excessively at the muzzle between treats, the dog is not ready to progress to the next step. You may even need to back up to a previous step for a while longer.

Step One: Hold a treat through the nose loop of the muzzle and lure the dog's nose up to the muzzle. Repeat this at least 15-30 times (until he is putting his nose into the entrance to the muzzle without hesitation).

Step Two: Hold the treat further inside the muzzle so the dog actually has to push his nose into the muzzle to get the treat. Repeat this at least 15-30 times per session until he is doing so without any hesitation.

Step Three: Hold the treat so the dog has to push his nose completely into the muzzle to reach the treat. As he does so, pull back (toward the dog's neck) on the muzzle strap so you apply some tension across the dog's nose with the muzzle as he takes the treat. Repeat at least 15-30 times per session until he is comfortable with this.

Step Four: At this point, once the dog puts his nose into the muzzle to get the treat, let him have the treat. Pull the straps back behind his neck and hold them there (you can also snap the strap together if you like). Give him a second treat and then take the muzzle off. Repeat.

Step Five: Put the muzzle on his nose, and then feed the treat. Snap the neck strap on, feed him another treat, count to 2 seconds and feed a third treat. Remove the muzzle and repeat.

Step Six: Repeat step five but over sessions gradually increase the amount of time he wears the muzzle by 5-10 second increments until he can wear it for one minute. You should intermittently reward him (every 5-10 seconds) as long as he is not trying to remove it.

Step Seven: Put the muzzle on, hold a treat in front of his nose and lure him to take several steps while wearing it. Give him the treat every 2-5 steps the dog takes as long as he is not fussing at the muzzle. Praise when he ignores the muzzle, but ignore him when he fusses with it.

Gradually increase the time the dog wears the muzzle and also the time between food rewards until they are spaced several minutes apart. At this point you can begin letting him randomly wear the muzzle for short periods of time (10-30 minutes). This is to teach him that it is a regular part of his life now and not specifically associated with any one thing (e.g. going to the vet and having something bad done to him).