

Behavior Management: Enrichment and Foraging Toys

What are foraging toys?

Foraging toys provide mental and physical exercise and enjoyment by simulating hunting and seeking for food. Dogs and cats are natural hunters and scavengers. They benefit from regularly exercising this part of their brain. Providing enrichment in the form of foraging toys can decrease boredom, improve enjoyment, and encourage dogs and cats to engage in species-specific behaviors in a desirable way.

Foraging toys encourage sniffing, chasing, capturing, manipulating, seeking, licking, chewing, and crunching, which are all enjoyable behaviors for dogs and cats.



Why should I provide foraging opportunities for a pet?

Puppies and kittens often explore the world with their mouths. Providing an appropriate outlet for oral behaviors can decrease the frequency of unwanted or nuisance behaviors. Many adult dogs and cats appear to enjoy intellectual exercises. Providing a regular opportunity for these exercises can contribute to both mental and physical well-being. Senior dogs and cats show improved cognitive health when they regularly solve puzzles and participate in enriching activities. Pets with an improved quality of life bring enjoyment to their family members.

How do I use a foraging toy?

1. Select a size-appropriate toy that cannot be accidentally swallowed. Ensure the toy is durable and will not easily fracture into pieces that could be swallowed. Check with your veterinarian regarding the best types of toys for your pet.
2. Choose a toy with an appropriate difficulty level. Provide supervision at first to ensure your pet engages with the toy safely.
3. Select treats with textures and tastes your pet enjoys. Fill the toy with the desired treats or use your pet's regular meal or a portion of their meal. If your dog or cat does not attempt to engage with the food-filled toy, try interacting with the toy. Move it around while your pet watches and learns that movement of the toy triggers the release of food.

Note: If you have more than one pet, you may need to separate them with baby gates, doors, pens, or crates. Some pets guard food-filled toys, particularly when the toys are novel. Use caution or seek professional advice if your pet exhibits aggressive behavior toward people while in possession of valuable food or toys.

What should I put inside foraging toys?

Stuffings for toys may be store-bought or homemade. There are many stuffing recipes available. Be sure the ingredients are safe, taking into account your pet's own dietary sensitivities.

Check with your veterinarian regarding the safety and balance of ingredients. Your veterinarian can give you guidelines for caloric intake based on your pet's size and activity level.

Which products are recommended?

Foraging toys can be homemade or purchased. Toys fall into several categories:

- Licking toys (e.g., Kong, Toppl)
- Hunting toys (e.g., Bob-A-Lot, Doc & Phoebe's Indoor Hunting System)
- Puzzle solving (e.g., Nina Ottoson Toys)
- Stationary seeking (e.g., Snuffle Mats, Towel Hides)

You can also make your own toys. Use safe materials and follow the guidelines noted above in "How Do I Use a Foraging Toy".

Pets should be monitored and supervised with all toys, at least initially. If a pet chews off pieces of a product, the product is not recommended for them. Even if not swallowed, hard products (hard plastic, bones, etc.) can cause injuries to our pets' teeth, so are not recommended.

How do I choose a foraging toy?

Difficulty level is important. When the pet is first playing with foraging toys, the toy needs to be easy enough to keep their interest and prevent frustration.

A lower-impact, beginner's foraging option is the Snuffle Mat. Both dogs and cats often enjoy Snuffle Mats. Snuffle Mats are pads with long, dense strands of fleece. Kibble or other small, dry treats can be nestled within the strands to promote sniffing and seeking behavior.

The Snuffle Mat can be used in a relatively small area, as your pet does not need to move the toy to access the food.

As your pet becomes more proficient in foraging, you may increase the difficulty level to keep them interested and challenged.



How can I tell a toy's difficulty level?

- Compare the size of the dispensing hole with the size of the treat: the bigger the ratio, the easier the task.
- Check the total number of dispensing holes: the fewer the openings, the more difficult the task.
- Consider the number of compartments that need to be manipulated: the more compartments, the more difficult the task.
- Note the number of tasks required to access the food: the more levers to push or directions to move, the more difficult the task.
- Consider the number of behaviors required to access food: engaging in only one task (e.g., licking) is easier than needing to paw, nose, roll, turn, pick up, or flip a toy before licking or eating.

The goal is to keep your pet occupied. They should enjoy the toy without becoming frustrated or bored.

Follow these guidelines to begin building your activity toy:

Simple and beginners' level: Sticky, paste-like substances (such as peanut butter) act as an edible glue. They are good initial considerations when building your activity toy. Spread peanut butter or squeeze cheese on the inside cavity of the activity toy. "Stuffin" by Kong company is a commercial product that is like cheese or peanut butter. These are easy and basic choices most pets enjoy. Canned pet foods with a paté consistency are another simple store-bought option.

Medium level: Spread a thin base in the activity toy using peanut butter or cheese. Add tiny pieces of dry treats, small dry kibble, or semi-moist dog food. Ideally, the added food should stick to the liner and increase the difficulty of the activity toy. Also, try plugging the small open end of a toy, such as a Kong or Toppl, with either peanut butter or something with a similar sticky consistency. Then place the smaller closed end of the toy into an empty unbreakable cup. Fill the large open end of the toy with canned food or broth and place the cup with the toy into the freezer. Pieces of dry kibble or small bits of chicken can also be added to the activity toy prior to freezing.

Advanced level: As above, make a base liner then completely stuff the toy with soft foods that freeze more firmly. Kibble and dry treats fall out easily when frozen, whereas pastes and soft foods are more difficult to remove. Be sure to monitor for frustration.

Be creative with these recipes. Check with your veterinarian about the suitability of any novel ingredient. Most pets tolerate foods such as smashed bananas, mashed potatoes, yogurt, and cottage cheese. These foods can be combined with other favored, familiar items. Be sure to clean each toy thoroughly after each use. Follow the cleaning directions recommended in this handout. Be aware that some foods may spoil after sitting in the activity toys for a long period of time.

How can I create homemade toys?

Get creative and explore your house. Look for containers that you might otherwise discard. Empty soda bottles and plastic milk jugs make excellent activity toys for pets that do not destroy or ingest the plastic.

1. Choose a size-appropriate container that your pet can manipulate.
2. Using a punch, drill, or heated piercing tool, make a series of holes in the container. The holes need to be just slightly larger than the size of your treats.
3. Place a quantity of kibble or treats inside the container. If you use an empty water bottle, you may replace the cap for a greater challenge.
4. Present the toy and roll it to show your pet the food comes out when the container moves.

Muffin tins combined with another conventional toy such as a tennis ball can also be fun!

1. Gather a metal cupcake or muffin pan, some tennis balls, and some treats.
2. Place a few kibbles or treats in the bottom of each cupcake well.
3. Place a ball into the cupcake well, on top of the treats.
4. Present the toy and lift one ball slightly to show your pet there are treats beneath.
5. Cats often like popover pans and ping pong balls for a smaller version of this toy

Be creative! There are many suitable household items that pets can be encouraged to manipulate. Be sure the object can be used safely based on your own pet's play habits. Your pet must be able to play without ingesting pieces of the objects. Examples of household items that can be fun to manipulate include toilet or paper towel rolls, empty cardboard boxes, or wadded up newspapers that can be crumpled around kibble.

What can I do if my pet doesn't like the activity toys?

Some pets may not be interested in foraging, instead preferring other types of enrichment such as training. Before giving up, first try to reduce the difficulty of the task and improve the value of the reward. Try giving the toy when your pet is a little hungry – just before feeding a scheduled meal. You may even try putting a small portion of the meal into a toy and offering it before the food bowl.

If your pet shows interest in the food, but suddenly stops or seems reluctant (especially after bumping or picking up the toy), consult your veterinarian to make sure your pet is not experiencing pain. Dental pain and neck pain can make a foraging toy unpleasant to use.

Can I use foraging toys for all my pet's meals?

As long as you keep track and ensure your pet receives a full daily ration of nutritious food, one or multiple activity toys can be used to replace the food bowl. Foraging toys provide pets with the opportunity to hunt for each meal. If you are not sure whether your pet would prefer to eat from a bowl or a food toy, you can ask. Put half the meal into a dish and the other half into a toy. If your pet consistently takes the toy first, then they have voted "yes" – they prefer to work for their food.

How do I keep the foraging toys clean?

- Clean and dry activity toys after each use so they remain sanitary.
- Clean hollow toys easily with a bottle cleaner and dish soap.
- Most toys can be washed in a dishwasher or clothes washer. Other toys, particularly toys made from cardboard boxes, tubes, or paper, should be disposed of after use.
- Put toys away between uses to keep them fresh and novel.

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