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# The Whole



# Dog Journal™

A monthly guide to natural dog care and training

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# Dogs Can Do the Math

*How to help them arrive at a positive answer.*

BY NANCY KERNS

**T**rainers are fond of saying that we train our dogs every day, whether or not we realize it. What they mean is, our dogs pay scrupulous attention to our behavior (even when it seems that they are ignoring us) so they can put themselves in a good position to profit from their association with us. If we are doing something that has potential benefits for them, they tend to tag along and turn on the charm; if we engage in activities that are distinctly unrewarding to them, they usually take a pass.

This is why your dog is more likely to follow you into the kitchen than, say, into the bathroom. Your presence in one room reliably predicts the appearance of food, and *sometimes* he gets some of it! Your presence in the other room, though, is a total bore – and sometimes it predicts a dog bath! Heading for the living room? Well, it depends. It's one thing if it's nighttime and you're carrying a bowl of popcorn. It's another thing entirely if it's midday and you're dragging a vacuum. One situation is promising for a dog and one is not. It's not rocket science; it's simple observation and deduction.

I've been trying to explain this concept to my husband, who sometimes becomes frustrated with our dog, Otto. Brian has certain expectations of dogs in general, and one is that they should be happy – nay, *eager* – to jump in the back of a truck at any time. Some dogs *relish* the opportunity to take a drive with their owners, even if it's just to the post office and back. But Otto does not enjoy riding in automobiles of any kind. In the



car, he curls himself into a ball on the floor of the backseat and lies there looking glum until we arrive at our destination. In the truck, he lies down behind the cab and doesn't get up until we turn off the engine. As a result, Otto's willingness to get in the car or truck is completely conditional.

For example, the presence of a bait bag full of treats at night almost always means we're going to a dog-training class, which he enjoys immensely. When I head to the truck wearing my hiking shoes or bike shorts, a fun run for Otto often follows, and so at these times, Otto will jump right in.

Other things predict Otto's discomfort. The appearance of Brian's fishing rod has often translated into a *very* long drive on bumpy, winding roads, and/or hours of lying tied up on a cold riverbank. *That* math is just not that difficult to do, even for a dog.

But at other times the problem is positively algebraic. Nancy + hiking shoes + treats sometimes = a trip to the vet. And once, Brian was alone (this often means fishing) but didn't have the fishing rod with him. *That* turned out to be a trick question; Brian snapped Otto's harness onto the safety belt and *then* went to get the fishing rod. In other words, we've unwittingly *trained* Otto to be wary of the car and truck.

Think about what you might be doing to reinforce your dog's undesirable behavior, and what you *could* do to reward him for the behavior you want.

NK

## CORRECTION:

In our 2010 review of dry dog foods, published in the February issue, CJ Foods was listed as the sole manufacturer of **Dick van Patten's Natural Balance** dry dog foods. In fact, CJ Foods, in Bern, Kansas, is the manufacturer of only the organic varieties of Natural Balance dry dog foods. The rest of Natural Balance's dry dog foods are manufactured by Diamond Pet Foods.

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# Sleeping in Is Sweet

*Five things to do when your dog wakes you up too early – every day!*

BY PAT MILLER

**T**hose last few minutes of sleep before the alarm goes off are a treasured sanctuary where we hide in dreams before the reality of the world intrudes. Few dog owners appreciate their canine pals robbing them of those golden moments. But some dogs seem to have an uncanny knack for anticipating the alarm by 15 or 20 minutes, and manage to routinely do just that.

Of course, puppy owners *expect* to be awakened by their baby dogs – or they should. It's unreasonable to think a young puppy can make it through the night without a potty break. Crated or otherwise appropriately confined, even an eight-week-old puppy will normally cry when his bowels and bladder need emptying, rather than soil his own bed. When this happens you must get up and take your pup out to poop and pee, and then immediately return him to his crate so he doesn't learn to wake you up for a wee-hours play or cuddle session.

Adult dogs, however, barring a health problem, should wait for you to get up rather than pushing back your wake-up time in eager anticipation of breakfast, or other morning activities. If your grown-up

dog has made it his mission to make sure you're never late for work (or breakfast) by waking you up every morning *before* your alarm does, try this:

**1 Rule out medical conditions.** Make sure your dog doesn't have a legitimate reason for getting up early. If he has a urinary tract infection or digestive upset, or some other medical issue that affects his elimination habits or otherwise makes him uncomfortable, he may *have* to go out 30 minutes before you normally get up to let him out.

**2 Tire him out the night before.** A tired dog is a well-behaved happy dog, *and* a late sleeper. Exercise uses up much of the energy that he presently can't wait to wake you up with – and also releases endorphins, which regulate mood, producing a feeling of well-being. Tiredness promotes sleeping in, and endorphins help reduce anxieties that may play a role in his early-bird activities.

**3 Feed him earlier/ better; make "last call" later.** Increase the time between your dog's last meal and his

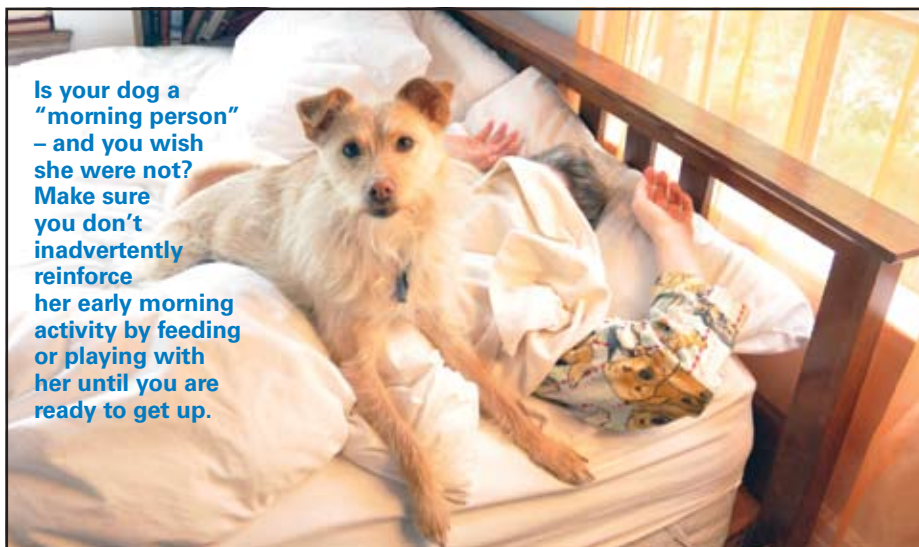
last bathroom opportunity to minimize the chance that he's waking you up because he really has to go. It only takes a few "I really have to go" mornings to set an early-riser routine, especially when rising is reinforced with, "Well, we're up now, no point in going back to bed . . . here's your breakfast!" Don't forget that high-quality diets are more digestible, which reduces fecal output, which reduces early-morning urgency.

**4 Reduce stimuli in the bedroom.** The less there is to awaken your dog, the less likely he is to awaken you. Close the drapes. Turn off the television. Turn on a white noise machine or soft classical music. Cover his crate. He is crated, isn't he? If not, restricting his movement is a simple way of preventing him from pouncing on you at 5:30 am. If he doesn't crate well, perhaps you can use a baby gate to keep him in the bathroom off your bedroom.

**5 Train him to sleep in.** If these management solutions alone don't work, you may be able to *train* him to sleep later. If your normal wake up time is 6:30 am and he consistently wakes you at 6:15, for one week set your alarm for 6:05. For the second week, set it for 6:10. Do not get up before the alarm goes off (*unless you're pretty sure he has an urgency problem!*) This will condition him to the sound of the alarm as his cue to wake up.

Each week set the alarm forward five more minutes, until you're at your desired wake-up time. It might take you a few weeks to get there, but it's gloriously simple, and it works. Unless you have young children who starting running through the house at 5:00 am, or garbage trucks start rumbling and banging down your street every morning at 5:30 – in which case all bets are off! 🐾

*Pat Miller, CPDT, is WDJ's Training Editor. See page 24 for her contact information.*



Is your dog a "morning person" – and you wish she were not? Make sure you don't inadvertently reinforce her early morning activity by feeding or playing with her until you are ready to get up.

# A Fishy Story

*Are undeclared artificial preservatives in pet food a problem?*

BY MARY STRAUS AND NANCY KERNS

Recently we've heard from a number of dog owners who are concerned about the use of ethoxyquin to preserve fish meal that is used in dog foods. We've had one e-mail forwarded to us several times expressing worry over links between undeclared ethoxyquin in pet foods and canine cancer.

We have long advised owners to pass over dog food that contains artificial preservatives such as butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA), butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT), tert-butyl hydroquinone (TBHQ), propyl gallate, and ethoxyquin, in favor of products made with natural preservatives, such as tocopherols (vitamin E), citric acid (vitamin C), and rosemary extract.

Though synthetic preservatives were once – as recently as 20 years ago – the *usual* preservative found in all dry dog foods, today, they appear only on the labels of low-cost and lower-quality products. Pet food companies appreciate the fact that artificial preservatives are less expensive, and they preserve food longer and more reliably than their natural counterparts. But owners who have their dogs' life-long health foremost in their minds are willing to pay more for more natural products that don't needlessly expose their dogs to potentially toxic chemicals.

It is possible, however, for pet foods to contain ethoxyquin or other artificial preservatives *even if those substances don't appear on the list of ingredients*.

## Myth busting

When we get worried (or panicked) mail about this issue, the writer is usually concerned about fish meal that's been loaded with ethoxyquin. The apparent source of this concern is the fact that the U.S. Coast Guard requires that fish meal that is transported on boats be treated with ethoxyquin, to prevent the volatile fatty acids in the product from spontaneously combusting while traveling on the high seas.

It turns out, though, that this is just part of the story. Only fish meal that is shipped by boat must be treated to prevent combustion; plenty of fish meal is manufactured on land and is not subject to any Coast Guard regulations. Also, the Coast Guard allows the use of other antioxidants to treat the fish meal – and even permits *untreated* fish meal to be shipped, if the shipper can provide documentation that the product does not display self-heating properties.

What seems to be a surprise to most dog owners is the fact that *all* animal protein meals – and animal fats – are treated by their manufacturers with preservatives. It's not just fish meal! Chicken meal, lamb meal, beef meal . . . preservatives are added to all of them.

As alarming as this might sound, it's only prudent; without some sort of preservation, the fat in these ingredients is subject to oxidation and rancidity. Oxidation is an irreversible process, so antioxidants must be added as early in the food manufacturing process as possible. However, natural preservatives can be used; when buying ingredients for use in their products, the preservation system used is just one of a number of specifications the pet food manufacturers can make. Naturally preserved meat meals cost more and are not as shelf-stable as artificially preserved meat meals, so the decision to use only naturally preserved animal protein meals in their products is a costly and deliberate choice that pet food manufacturers must make.

## Not on the label

It's the fat in meat or poultry meal that needs protection from oxidation. Animal protein meals (i.e., "chicken meal," "lamb meal," etc.) usually contain 10 to 14 percent fat. While the preservative used to protect the major fat sources in a dog food (such as "chicken fat") must be declared on pet food labels, the amount of preservative used in protein meals is generally considered low enough to meet the definition

of an "incidental additive," which is not required to appear on the product label. At least, that's one explanation for why the preservatives used in protein meals don't have to appear on pet food labels.

A more prevalent explanation is that there is no legal requirement for pet food makers to disclose substances that were added to an ingredient before it reaches the pet food manufacturing plant. We've been told countless times that a pet food maker is responsible for disclosing only the ingredients they themselves mix in during the manufacture of the pet food. In other words, "We didn't put ethoxyquin in the fish meal; it was already there when we bought the meal! And because we didn't put ethoxyquin in our pet food, we don't have to list it among our products' ingredients."

We've heard this claim so many times, in fact, that we were surprised to learn that it's not wholly accurate. Dave Dzanis, DVM, PhD, DACVN, a consultant on animal nutrition, labeling, and regulation, writes in his December 2009 column in the trade publication *Petfood Industry*:

"For a labeling exemption as an 'incidental additive' to apply, the level in the final product would have to be low enough to where it no longer had any technical or functional effect [21 CFR 501.100(a)(3)(i)]. Considering that fish meal processors may add 1,000 ppm or more, the residual amount of ethoxyquin in the petfood still could be functional, hence would have to be declared.

"Also, FDA regulation 21 CFR 573.380 expressly specifies that any animal feed containing ethoxyquin must declare it, which is unique language compared to the codified requirements for other approved food additives. That statement can be interpreted as superseding any labeling exemption. In fact, if memory serves

me, in the 1990s FDA did advise that ethoxyquin must be declared whether added directly or indirectly, irrespective of source or level.”

We’re not sure how this information can be reconciled with the fact that many pet food companies use fish meal that has been preserved with ethoxyquin, yet ethoxyquin does not appear on the label. Perhaps most companies do not fully understand or have a different interpretation of these rules, and the regulations are simply not enforced.

## A closer look at ethoxyquin

Ethoxyquin is a chemical antioxidant and was approved as a pet food additive in 1959. It is used to preserve certain spices (chili powder, paprika, and ground chili only), and is also used as a pesticide and a rubber preservative. Residual levels from animal feed are allowed in meat, poultry, and eggs for human consumption.

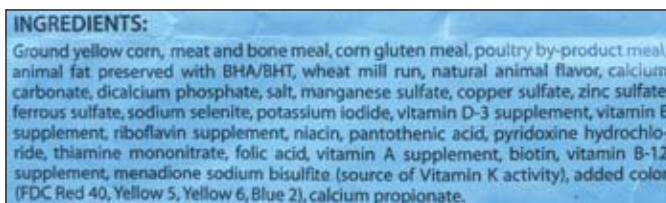
The FDA’s Center for Veterinary Medicine (CVM) began receiving reports in 1988 of health issues that pet owners and some veterinarians suspected could be linked to ethoxyquin in pet foods, such as allergic reactions, skin problems, major organ failure, behavior problems, and cancer. Studies done by Monsanto (the manufacturer of ethoxyquin) at the request of the CVM, showed dose-dependent effects on liver enzymes and pigment. As a result, in 1997 the CVM asked the pet food industry to voluntarily lower the maximum level of ethoxyquin in dog foods from 150 ppm (parts per million) to 75 ppm. It said that most pet foods never exceeded the lower amount, even before this recommended change.

Is this level safe? According to a document produced by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), “Dogs are more susceptible to ethoxyquin toxicity than rats, with elevated liver enzymes and microscopic findings in the liver occurring at doses as low as 4 mg/kg/day over a 90-day feeding period.” The “4 mg/kg” means 4 mg ethoxyquin per kilogram of the dog’s body weight (not the weight of the food).

Per CVM calculations, 4 mg/kg body weight is the equivalent of 160 ppm in food, just barely above the upper limit that is still allowed in pet food. It’s possible that longer-term ingestion could reduce the

amount needed to cause adverse effects and increase the potential for harm. In addition, dogs who eat more food in relation to their body weight, such as puppies, nursing females, and working or other very active dogs, are at risk of exceeding the amount known to cause liver damage.

Let’s look at the fish meal that is processed at sea and treated with ethoxyquin at time of production. Coast Guard regulations say that this fish meal must contain at least 100 ppm ethoxyquin at time of shipment. It’s questionable, though, how much ethoxyquin remains in a finished pet food made with this fish meal. The amount of fish meal used and the method and temperature of the dog food’s manufacture will affect the amount of ethoxyquin present in the final product. We’ve seen claims from companies whose dog foods contain fish meal preserved with ethoxyquin that the foods contain 5 ppm or less ethoxyquin.



**Due to consumer outcry, ethoxyquin is very rarely seen on the label of even very low-quality dog foods (like this one). But that doesn’t mean the food is ethoxyquin-free.**

Is this lower level safe? No one knows for sure, but it’s certainly less toxic than the amounts that the FDA *allows* in pet food. And it’s within the limits allowed in some human foods (0.5 to 5 ppm in meat and fat, with higher amounts allowed for spices).

The FDA and pet food industry officials defend the use of ethoxyquin, saying that ethoxyquin is safer than rancid fats. While this may be true, artificial preservatives are not the only way to prevent rancidity. In addition, if ethoxyquin is safe, why is it not permitted to be added to human foods (other than three spices), and why is the acceptable level for pet foods 50 times the residual amount allowed in human food?

## Other artificial preservatives

Some dog breeders and consumer advocates suspect ethoxyquin of causing cancer, though studies don’t seem to bear that out except at very high levels (5,000 ppm or more). On this point, the EPA concluded, “potential cancer risk is below the Agency’s level of concern.” The artificial preservatives BHA and BHT are considered

more likely carcinogens.

BHA and BHT are used in human and pet foods to keep fats from going rancid. Both have been linked to cancer in laboratory animals; it’s unknown whether they cause the same in people and dogs. There is evidence that certain people may have difficulty metabolizing BHA and BHT, resulting in health and behavior changes. Again, we don’t know if the same is true for our dogs.

## Yet another matter of trust

In the past, we’ve felt confident in recommending dog foods whose labels do not reflect the inclusion of artificial preservatives. That’s because we were under the impression that the maximum amount of artificial preservatives that could be present in a food whose label did not include them couldn’t possibly be high enough to cause harm. Since “doing the math”

on the amount of synthetic antioxidants that *can* be present in a food whose label does not reflect its inclusion, though, we’ve become uneasy. It no longer seems sufficient to trust that a label review will always reveal the presence of artificial preservatives.

How then can a consumer find out if their dog’s food contains ethoxyquin, BHA, BHT, or other artificial preservatives? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers. You can contact the companies or check their websites, in an effort to find out if they use only naturally preserved meat meals in their foods. Some companies have started making “ethoxyquin-free” claims on their labels and product literature. One would have to trust the company’s answer, though; short of conducting expensive laboratory tests, there is no way to verify these claims. And even usually trustworthy companies can be duped by a contract manufacturer or ingredient supplier.

If you are adamant about avoiding *any* amount of artificial preservative in your dog’s diet, you would be well-advised to switch to a diet that does not contain meat meals. Canned foods and frozen diets are generally made with fresh and frozen animal ingredients, which are not usually treated with preservatives. Of course, feeding your dog a well-planned home-prepared diet made of fresh ingredients is the only way to be absolutely certain of ingredient content and quality. 🐾

# Stoned Again?

*Diagnosing, treating, and preventing calcium oxalate stones in dogs.*

BY CJ PUOTINEN AND MARY STRAUS

**B**ladder and kidney stones are serious problems in dogs as well as people. These conditions – which are also known as uroliths or urinary calculi – can be excruciatingly painful as well as potentially fatal. Fortunately, informed caregivers can do much to prevent the formation of stones and in some cases actually help treat stones that develop.

Last month, we described struvite stones (see “Is Your Dog Stoned?” WDJ April 2010). Struvites contain magnesium, ammonium, and phosphate. They almost always occur in the bladder in combination with a bacterial infection and are most frequently found in small-breed females.

This month, we examine calcium oxalate or “CaOx” stones.

## Calcium oxalate stones

CaOx stones occur in both the bladder (lower urinary tract) and kidneys (upper urinary tract) of male and female dogs. Most calcium oxalate uroliths are nephroliths (found in the kidney), and most of the affected patients are small-breed males. CaOx uroliths are radiopaque and most are easily seen on radiographs (X-rays).

In addition to breed and sex, risk factors for CaOx stones include being overweight, under-exercised, neutered, and eating a dry food diet, which contributes to more concentrated urine. Small dogs are thought to be more susceptible because they drink less water relative to their size than large dogs do.

One risk factor is insufficient or abnormal nephrocalcin, a strongly acidic glycoprotein present in normal urine that inhibits calcium oxalate crystal growth. Dogs who produce normal and sufficient nephrocalcin have a reduced risk of developing calcium oxalate stones.

Certain prescription drugs contribute to the formation of CaOx uroliths. Prednisone and other cortisone-type medications prescribed for inflammatory illnesses such as arthritis, itchy skin, or inflammatory bowel

disease, can contribute to the formation of CaOx stones. So can the diuretic drug furosemide (brand names Lasix or Salix), which is given to dogs with congestive heart failure. Thiazide-class diuretics are recommended in place of furosemide for dogs who are prone to forming CaOx stones. Some nutritional supplements, such as vitamins C and D, are believed to contribute to oxalate stone formation.

Uroliths can develop in any breed, but the greatest number of calcium oxalate stones presented for analysis have come from Miniature Schnauzers, Bichon Frises, Standard Schnauzers, Lhasa Apsos, Shih Tzus, Yorkshire Terriers, Miniature Poodles, Pomeranians, Parson Russell Terriers, Papillons, Keeshonds, Samoyeds, Chihuahuas, Cairn Terriers, Maltese, Toy Poodles, West Highland White Terriers, Dachshunds, and mixed breeds.

Cocker Spaniels, German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers, and Labrador Retrievers are believed to be at *decreased* risk of CaOx stones.

Conventional veterinary practitioners tend to consider calcium oxalate stones irreversible, unaffected by diet or medical therapy, and untreatable except by surgery. They may attempt to remove small bladder stones by flushing the bladder with sterile saline, or perform shock wave or laser lithotripsy (processes that break stones into small pieces that can be flushed out or excreted in the dog’s urine).

Uroliths pose a more serious problem for male dogs than females, because their urine travels through a hollow bone (os penis) that surrounds the urethra within the penis. The bone cannot stretch or expand to accommodate a stone traveling through it, and obstructions readily result.

For males with recurring stones, a surgical procedure called urethrostomy sends urine on a new path, avoiding the os penis. The urethrostomy creates a new urinary opening in the scrotum area. This type of surgery cannot be performed unless the

## What you can do . . .

- If your dog’s breed has a higher risk of stones, stay alert for signs they have developed.
- Encourage your dog to drink water and give him frequent opportunities to urinate.
- If your dog is prone to calcium oxalate stones, consider switching to a low-oxalate homemade diet with added calcium citrate.
- Avoid low-protein prescription foods!
- For dogs who are prone to forming CaOx stones, add B vitamins but avoid supplements that contain vitamins C and D.



dog is neutered; if he is intact, he can be neutered at the time of the urethrostomy.

In up to 60 percent of conventionally treated patients, calcium oxalate stones recur within three years. In dogs with Cushing’s Disease (hyperadrenocorticism) or excessive calcium in the blood (hypercalcemia), both of which predispose dogs to CaOx stones, the recurrence rate is faster. It’s important to treat these underlying causes, if found, to help prevent recurrence. The recurrence rate among Bichons is higher than for any other breed.

Calcium oxalate crystals are of concern, but their presence doesn’t necessarily mean your dog is at risk of forming stones. Crystals are significant only if found in fresh urine. Crystals that form when urine is refrigerated or analyzed more than 30

minutes after collection may be incidental and not indicative of a problem. Dogs with calcium oxalate crystals in fresh urine should be monitored, and if the finding continues, steps should be taken to reduce the risk of stone formation, particularly in breeds most commonly affected.

## Death sentence to discovery

In 1997, Molly McMouse, a 14-year-old Lhasa Apso belonging to Leslie Bean of Houston, Texas, was diagnosed with very dense, inoperable calcium oxalate stones affecting both kidneys. Bean owned three more Lhasas – 15-year-old FuzzerBear, 13-year-old Peepers, and 11-year-old CB Wigglesworth – who were closely related to Molly. Fearful that her other dogs could be afflicted by the same condition, Bean had them tested, and was shattered when each received the same diagnosis.

“My husband and I were told that oxalates only proliferate in size and number,” she recalls, “and that as the calcification of their kidneys increased, all four of our dogs would die, probably within six to nine months.”

At the time, Bean was founding director of patient advocacy at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, a position that helped her contact medical experts of every description. She checked with veterinarians, veterinary researchers, and directors of veterinary schools and laboratories around the country, only to receive the same sad news from all.

“Every one of them said these stones cannot be dissolved,” she says. “They all felt bad about it, but they agreed that the prognosis for my dogs was hopeless.”

Bean’s Lhasas had been on a premium, holistic food, but after their diagnoses, at the recommendation of their veterinarians, Bean put them on a low-protein, low-phosphorus, low-sodium prescription diet. The dogs disliked the new food and their to-the-floor show coats rapidly dulled.

At that point, Bean says, “I accepted the fact that my dogs were going to die but I wanted to make their final months as terrific as possible.” Tossing the prescription food, she began feeding fresh foods such as lamb and peas, chicken and rice, and beef and broccoli. “I figured if they had so little time, they were damned well going to enjoy what they ate,” she says, “and they *loved* it. I

## Signs of Stones

Not all kidney and bladder stones harm their hosts. Veterinarians often discover uroliths in healthy dogs during routine examinations, and many dogs pass small stones or “gravel” in their urine without incident. It’s when bladder and kidney stones interfere with urination that they create complications. Watch for the following symptoms:

- Blood in your dog’s urine
- The frequent passing of small amounts of urine
- “Accidents” in house-trained dogs
- Straining to urinate while holding the position much longer than usual
- Licking the genital area more than usual
- Painful urination that causes your dog to yelp from discomfort
- Cloudy, foul-smelling urine that may contain blood or pus
- Tenderness in the bladder area or pain in the lower back
- Fever and lethargy

If you notice any of these symptoms, contact your vet at once. A dog who strains and then releases a flood of urine may have just passed a stone. If you can find the stone, take it with you to the vet so it can be accurately identified. A dog whose urine is completely blocked has a medical emergency; a plugged urethra can cause urine to back up into the system, resulting in kidney failure. The backup can also cause the dog’s bladder to stretch to the point of rupturing or damaging the bladder’s muscle tone, making it difficult to empty completely.

can still see them dancing with joy when I carried their bowls to their places. Literally within two weeks they began acting more energetic, looked younger, had a spring in their step, and their eyes were clearer. Their coats looked better, too, and we soon had to cut almost an inch in length from each dog every month. Although that is common in young Lhasas in show coat, the rate of growth slows with age, so this was a really noticeable difference.”



Leslie Bean and FuzzerBear.

Because oxalic acid forms strong mineral bonds that can become calcium oxalate crystals and eventually CaOx stones, Bean speculated that low-oxalate foods might help prevent the stones’ formation (see “Oxalates in food,” page 9), and she made those ingredients the foundation of her dogs’ menus.

## Protein

In the past, diets restricted in both protein and phosphorus were thought to reduce the risk of calcium oxalate formation. Studies found, however, that dietary phosphorus restriction increased calcium absorption and the risk of calcium oxalate formation, while higher levels of dietary protein reduced the risk of uroliths. **Cur-**

**rent recommendations for dogs prone to forming CaOx stones say that diets should *not* be restricted in protein, calcium, or phosphorus.**

In February 2002, *The American Journal of Veterinary Research* published a study conducted at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine’s Minnesota Urolith Center that compared dietary factors in canned food with the formation of calcium oxalate uroliths in dogs, with surprising results. Canned diets with the highest amount of carbohydrate were associated with an *increased* risk of CaOx urolith formation. Contrary to commonly accepted beliefs, the study concluded that “canned diets formulated to contain high amounts of protein, fat, calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, sodium, potassium, chloride, and moisture and a low amount of carbohydrate may minimize the risk of CaOx urolith formation in dogs.”

In contrast, Hill’s Canine u/d, often prescribed for dogs prone to forming CaOx stones, is low in protein, calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, and potassium.

At the beginning of her nutritional experiment, Bean reduced her dogs’ protein levels so much that they began to lose muscle mass.

“After much research, analysis, and discussion with my veterinarians,” she

says, “I increased their protein levels to 33-40 percent of the total volume of food. They quickly regained their lost weight and muscle, and there were no further problems with muscle loss.”

As Bean discovered, it’s very important not to reduce protein too much. Even the most severely phosphorus-restricted diets for renal failure recommend feeding a minimum of 1 gram of protein per pound of body weight daily.

## Recheck

As the Lhasas continued to thrive, their primary veterinarian, Jane Milan, encouraged Bean to return them for another ultrasound test to the veterinarian, a specialist in internal medicine, who had first diagnosed them. “I just didn’t want to hear bad news,” says Bean, “so I kept putting it off.”

Eight months after their diet change and past or near their predicted death dates, she made the appointment. “I was really nervous,” she says. “They looked terrific, but I had no way of knowing what was going on inside them. And the vet was with them for an unusually long time, which made me even more anxious.”

Finally the somber-looking veterinarian returned to the waiting room carrying two of the dogs and said, “I don’t know how to tell you this.”

Bean assumed that her other two dogs had died during their ultrasound tests and she nearly fainted, but the vet’s good news revived her. The calcium oxalate stones that had been ticking time bombs were nowhere to be found. That’s what caused the long delay—he could not at first believe his test results. “The two older dogs still had five tiny stones,” she says, “but they had shrunk to the size of pin-dots, and they soon disappeared.”

Despite the kidney damage already caused by their calcium oxalates, each of the already senior Lhasas lived several more years. FuzzerBear died at age 19, the other three lived to be 18, and frequent check-ups showed all four to be completely free from calcium oxalate stones for the rest of their lives.

At the suggestion of their veterinarians, Bean continued to study canine nutrition and assembled a set of guidelines that described her dogs’ regimen.

“I am not a veterinarian licensed to practice veterinary medicine in any state and make no claims or representations as such,” Bean reminds everyone. “I am simply a pet owner whose dogs suffered

from intractable problems. I developed FuzzerFood, named for Fuzzerbear, based upon the independent research I conducted to help my own dogs. My discoveries are not intended to be veterinary advice, nor are they a drug, biologic, or other therapeutic or diagnostic substance or technique designed to replace a consultation with a qualified veterinarian.”

She recommends that owners of dogs with calcium oxalate stones work closely with their veterinarians, beginning with a baseline ultrasound, complete blood panel, and urinalysis. “Start now if you have not already,” she suggests, “to maintain records of blood work and urinalysis reports as well as your own notes as you go.”

## Water, the key ingredient

The most important thing you can do for a stone-prone dog is increase fluid consumption and opportunities to urinate. Urine becomes concentrated when insufficient fluids are consumed or when dogs are not able to relieve themselves and have to hold their urine for long periods. And concentrated urine contributes to supersaturation with minerals that can precipitate into crystals and lead to stones.

One way to encourage dogs to increase their water consumption is to add salt to their food, but salt is controversial when it comes to calcium oxalate uroliths. Increasing dietary salt encourages the kidneys to excrete more calcium, raising urinary calcium levels.

One might predict that increased sodium would therefore lead to increased calcium oxalate formation, but that isn’t necessarily true. In a 2003 study, dogs were fed dry diets containing varying amounts of sodium. The diets that contained 300 mg sodium (about 1/8 teaspoon of salt) per 100 calories significantly reduced urinary calcium oxalate supersaturation over diets containing 60 mg or even 200 mg sodium per 100 calories. Increased fluid consumption resulting from the thirst generated by additional salt probably offset the increase in calcium excretion. A human retrospective study published in 2009 concluded, “Increasing urine sodium does not appear to increase the risk of calcium oxalate nephrolithiasis (kidney stones).”

Bean, however, does not add salt to food. The majority of human studies indicate that adding salt is inadvisable, and many who elected to apply the FuzzerFood regimen for their own dogs were unsuccessful in attempts to dissolve or prevent

recurrence of calcium oxalate stones when they departed from the guidelines Bean developed for her own dogs.

You can help your dog drink more by providing fresh water in clean dishes in several locations; changing the water frequently; adding small amounts of tuna water, salt-free or low-sodium broth, a favorite juice, or other flavoring agent to drinking water in addition to offering plain water; adding water to food; offering ice cubes as treats; using a pet water fountain to provide continuously filtered fresh running water; offering water at every opportunity; and carrying water and a portable bowl while hiking or traveling.

What type of water should you use? Bean prefers steam-distilled water because it contains no minerals that might combine with excess oxalic acid. Physicians she consulted with told her that both hard and soft water may increase the risk of calcium oxalate formation. Reverse-osmosis water filters remove 95 percent of minerals, making RO-filtered water nutritionally similar to distilled water.

Not all minerals in water contribute to kidney or bladder stones. In several studies conducted in the 1990s, human patients who formed calcium oxalate nephroliths drank a French mineral water containing high levels of calcium (202 parts per million) and magnesium (36 ppm). Nearly every risk factor for calcium oxalate nephroliths improved significantly. The same patients also drank local tap water and mineral water with low calcium/magnesium concentrations, neither of which improved the measured risk factors. The researchers concluded, “The risk of calcium oxalate stone formation can be significantly reduced by consumption of mineral water which is rich in calcium and magnesium.”

Other research on the effects of hard and soft water on urolith formation has shown mixed results regarding risk, possibly due to variations in mineral content and ratios, along with factors such as whether the water was given with or between meals. For this reason, distilled water may be safest, particularly for dogs with kidney stones or recurrent bladder stones.

Getting extra water into your dog is only part of the urolith-prevention strategy. Just as important is the frequent release of urine. Give your dog many opportunities to go outside during the day. If your dog is indoors alone or crated for hours each day, find a way to create a convenient elimina-



tion area using plastic, newspapers, towels, a patch of sod, or whatever you can devise to keep your dog from having to hold her urine for long periods.

## Urinary pH

Calcium oxalate stones form in urine that is acidic, typically measuring between 5.0 and 6.5 on the pH scale. Calcium oxalate crystals are generally not sensitive to urinary pH, but marked acidification that induces metabolic acidosis can promote calcium oxalate stone formation due to increased urinary calcium concentration.

A common recommendation for dogs prone to forming calcium oxalate stones is to alkalize the body with foods or medications to bring the urinary pH closer to 7, which is neutral. Alkalinizing the urine will not cause existing stones to dissolve but may help prevent new stones from forming. It's important not to try to alkalize the urine too much, as this can lead to the formation of calcium phosphate stones.

You can monitor your dog's urine by holding a pH test strip in the stream or by collecting urine in a paper cup or clean dish for testing.

But don't be surprised if your dog's urinary pH stays where it is. Leslie Bean describes her careful monitoring of her dogs' urinary pH as a source of discouragement. "I thought that unless I could bring their pH higher, their stones would increase," she says. "To the contrary, not only did they not increase, the stones dissolved. I learned that the key is to monitor the pH and know where you are, but not to panic if the urine stubbornly remains more acidic than you would like."

## Oxalates in food

Oxalic acid is found in both plants and animals, with plants containing higher levels. It forms strong bonds with sodium, potassium, magnesium, and calcium, creating oxalate salts. The term "oxalate" usually refers to a salt of oxalic acid, one of which is calcium oxalate. Sodium and potassium oxalate salts are water-soluble, but calcium oxalate is not, and it is what forms CaOx uroliths.

Interest in low-oxalate diets has increased recently because of possible links between oxalates and human kidney stones, arthritis, fibromyalgia, female vulvar pain, autism and other pervasive developmental disorders, and chronic inflammation. As a result, there is growing demand for accurate data on the oxalate content of foods.



**Getting your dog to drink more water is important if your dog has (or used to have) any type of kidney or bladder stones. Provide several sources of fresh, clean water, especially if you have more than one dog.**

When Bean began her research 13 years ago, much of the information published about this subject was quite old. Eventually she found a small booklet published by the University of California at San Diego, "Oxalate Content of Select Foods," which featured more current data and gave her a list of foods to include and avoid.

Today, the Oxalosis and Hyperoxaluria Foundation publishes an up-to-date list of foods and their oxalate content. Based on research from 2008 and revised as new figures become available, this report divides foods into very high, high, medium, and low levels of oxalates according to serving size (see "Oxalate Content of Various Foods," next page). The foods in Group 1 (very high-oxalate foods) are best avoided by dogs prone to calcium oxalate stones. Group 2 (high-oxalate) foods should also be avoided.

Group 3 foods have moderate oxalate levels. They can be fed in moderate amounts as long as calcium is also given with the meal. Group 4 (low-oxalate foods) are "green light" ingredients, and can be fed in any quantity, though they should still be combined with calcium. See the complete list, available through the Oxalosis and Hyperoxaluria Foundation, for

information about additional foods, including herbs, spices, combination foods, and beverages.

Some websites and publications incorrectly list meat, liver, other organ meats, shellfish, cheese, yogurt, broccoli, sardines, cherries, brussels sprouts, olives, and strawberries as dangerous for CaOx-sensitive dogs, based on outdated information. All of those foods are actually low in oxalates.

## Designing the menu

Because it's difficult to find commercial foods made without ingredients that are problematic for dogs prone to CaOx stones, home-prepared diets may produce the best results. For those who already feed a home-prepared diet to their dogs, the adjustments are simple. For those who are new to dog food preparation, designing an effective menu need not be complicated. Your dog's food can be prepared along with your own meals or made in advance and refrigerated or frozen in single portions for later use.

Start by feeding different types of meat, poultry, eggs, fish, and dairy in order to provide a variety of flavors and nutrients. The food Bean feeds her dogs is about 40 percent protein by volume, but higher

# Oxalate Content of Various Foods

The Oxalosis and Hyperoxaluria Foundation publishes an up-to-date list of foods and their oxalate content. Based on research from 2008 and revised as new figures become available, this report divides foods into very high, high, medium, and low levels of oxalates according to serving size. See the complete list at [ohf.org/docs/Oxalate2008.pdf](http://ohf.org/docs/Oxalate2008.pdf) for information about additional foods, including herbs, spices, combination foods, and beverages.

## Group 1 (very high-oxalate foods) are best avoided by dogs prone to calcium oxalate stones.

- Bran cereal, almonds, buckwheat flour, beets, miso (fermented soy), sesame seeds, tahini (sesame paste), rhubarb, spinach, and Swiss chard.

## Group 2 (high-oxalate) foods should also be avoided.

- Nuts: cashews, hazelnuts or filberts, peanuts, peanut butter, and pecans.
- Vegetables: okra, collard greens, mustard greens, fried potatoes, sweet potatoes, and canned tomato paste.
- Legumes: black, white, great northern, navy, and pink beans.
- Soy products: textured vegetable protein, soy milk, soy burger, soy yogurt, soy nuts, and soybeans.
- Fruit: figs, kiwi fruit, and dried apricots.
- Grains: barley, cornmeal, cream of wheat, whole wheat flour and spaghetti, brown rice flour, and wheat bran.
- Chocolate, which is toxic to dogs, is a high-oxalate food.

## Group 3 foods have moderate oxalate levels. They can be fed in moderate amounts (see the complete list for serving sizes) as long as calcium is also given with the meal.

- Nuts and seeds: pistachios and walnuts (macadamia nuts should not be fed to dogs).
- Vegetables: carrots, celery, green beans, boiled white potatoes without the skin, summer and winter squash, tomato sauce, and tomatoes. Skinless red potatoes are considerably lower in oxalates than white or russet potatoes; all potatoes are lower in oxalates when the skin is removed.
- Legumes: kidney, pinto, and adzuki beans.
- Fruit: blackberries, blueberries, mandarin and other small oranges, mangos, and prunes.
- Grains: bulgar wheat, brown rice, elbow macaroni, egg noodles, spaghetti, pasta, rye flour, oats, and oatmeal.

## Group 4 (low-oxalate foods) are “green light” ingredients. They can be fed in any quantity, though they should still be combined with calcium. Foods in boldface are particularly low in oxalates.

- Nuts and seeds: **coconut**; and **flax**, pumpkin, squash, and sunflower seeds.
- Vegetables: artichokes, **asparagus**, **avocado**, broccoli, **brussels sprouts**, **cabbage**, **cauliflower**, **corn**, **cucumber**, **garlic**, green or red peppers, **lettuce**, **mushrooms**, **peas**, **canned pumpkin**, **sauerkraut**, canned string beans, tomato juice, **canned water chestnuts**, and **zucchini**. (Onions should never be fed to dogs.)
- Legumes: lima beans, **black-eyed peas**, garbanzo beans, lentils, and split peas.
- Fruit: apples, fresh apricots, bananas, **cantaloupe**, **cherries**, **cranberries**, grapefruit, **lemons**, lychee, **all melons**, **nectarines**, **olives**, oranges, **papayas**, **passion fruit**, **peaches**, pears, **pineapple**, **plums**, raspberries, strawberries, tangerines, and **watermelon**. (Neither grapes nor raisins should ever be fed to dogs.)
- Grains: **white bread**, whole wheat bread, cornbread, **hominy (corn grits)**, oat bran, rice noodles, semolina, white rice, corn and white flour tortillas, and **wild rice**.
- Fats: all fats and oils, including butter.
- Fish: all fish and seafood (shellfish).
- Dairy: **all**, including **cheese**, **cottage cheese**, **cream**, **eggs**, **yogurt**, **ice cream**, and **sour cream**.
- Meat: **all meat** and **poultry**, including organ meats, **luncheon meats**, **sausage**, and **bacon**.
- Sweeteners: all natural sweeteners, including sugar (not recommended for dogs) and honey.

protein levels work well for many dogs. The rest of the diet should be low-oxalate grains and/or vegetables.

While Bean doesn't include organ meats in her FuzzerFood guidelines, adding ½ ounce (about 1 tablespoon) of liver per pound of other foods will add valuable nutrients to a home-prepared diet.

Meat can be ground, cut into cubes, or served in a single piece, assuming your dog doesn't have problems chewing. It can be fed raw or cooked. Because CaOx dogs on raw bone-based diets have continued to form stones, the FuzzerFood regimen does not include bones. Freeze-dried liver and similar dog treats are appropriate for training and special occasions. Avoid treats that contain high-oxalate ingredients, and factor treats into the daily food allotment of overweight dogs.

Boiling vegetables in water greatly reduces their oxalate content, while steaming reduces levels slightly. Of course, boiling reduces nutritional content, so it's a trade-off. When you feed Group 3 (moderate-oxalate) vegetables, consider giving smaller amounts raw and larger amounts cooked. Adding digestive enzymes to food at serving time helps replace enzymes destroyed by heat.

Most 10-pound dogs need less than 1 cup of food by volume, while dogs weighing 50 pounds may need closer to 3 cups per day. Bean's Lhasas maintain their 12- to 14-pound body weight on slightly more than 1 cup per day. The amount to feed will vary according to your dog's activity level and the amount of low-calorie vegetables in the diet. Because key supplements should be given twice a day with food, consider feeding breakfast and dinner rather than one meal per day.

## Calcium

In the past, calcium was thought to be a risk factor for the formation of calcium oxalate stones. Later studies found, however, that calcium binds oxalate and thus actually reduces the risk of calcium oxalate stones when given with meals.

When she spoke with urologists who deal with human kidney stones, Bean learned that supplementing homemade food with calcium citrate neutralizes oxalates in urine, so she began giving it to her dogs with meals while avoiding all other mineral supplements. “Citrate is an important natural inhibitor of calcium oxalate stones,” she says. “When calcium citrate is combined with food at mealtime,

it helps absorb and bind excess oxalic acid in the gut. This bound oxalate cannot be absorbed and is excreted through the feces. This means that it does not get into the bloodstream or kidneys to cause stones.”

Pure calcium citrate powder is inexpensive and easy to use. Bean adds 300 to 350 mg of NOW brand Vegetarian Powdered Calcium Citrate to each 8 ounces (½ pound) of fresh food to balance the diet’s calcium:phosphorus ratio. Calcium citrate should only be added to homemade diets, or to the fresh portion of a combined diet, as commercial diets should already contain the right amount of calcium (though, unfortunately, they rarely use calcium citrate).

## Supplements

For more than 40 years, the medical literature has reported on the success of a simple

nutritional therapy for the prevention of calcium oxalate stones in humans using magnesium and vitamin B6. In studies published in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, *The Journal of the American College of Nutrition*, and other medical journals since 1967, patients with longstanding, recurrent calcium oxalate kidney stones received 200, 300, or 500 mg magnesium oxide with or without 10 mg pyridoxine (vitamin B6) daily for five years or more, during which their stone formation fell by more than 90 percent. When measured, their urine increased its ability to keep calcium oxalate in solution.

Because vitamin B6 deficiencies can contribute to an increase in oxalate production, many veterinarians prescribe this vitamin for dogs prone to CaOx stones. Severe vitamin B6 deficiencies may result from genetic disorders. Vitamin B6 is

available as an oral supplement or by injection. Follow label directions or, if using a human product, give ¼ of the total dose for each 25 pounds of body weight.

A B-complex supplement provides all of the needed B-family vitamins. Give 50 mg twice per day to dogs weighing 50 pounds or more, and one-fourth or half that amount to smaller dogs.

The FuzzerFood regimen includes Omega-3 fish or salmon oil, a B-complex vitamin, and vitamin E, with optional CoQ10, magnesium, glucosamine, digestive enzymes, and probiotics.

Magnesium can have a laxative effect, so begin at the low end of the range, which is 3 to 5 mg per pound of body weight per day, divided into morning and evening doses and given with meals. Magnesium supplementation is contraindicated for dogs in renal failure, so if that is your dog’s

## Another Success Story

In September 2008, Cosette, a Shih Tzu belonging to Atlanta-area dog trainer Cathy Bruce, was diagnosed with 20 calcium oxalate bladder stones. In an effort to avoid surgery, Bruce experimented with her dog’s diet. She was able to raise Cosette’s urinary pH slightly, but it never got above 7.0. Cosette disliked the new foods and lost a pound while follow-up X-rays (taken three and six months after diagnosis) showed no change.

In the summer of 2009, Bruce began feeding a commercially prepared frozen raw diet. Cosette’s appetite returned and she regained the weight she had lost. At about the same time, with her veterinarian’s approval, Bruce began adding small amounts of potassium citrate to Cosette’s food. She had tried potassium citrate granules months before but Cosette wouldn’t eat any food they were mixed with. When the powder from Nature’s Pharmacy potassium citrate capsules was added to her food, Cosette never noticed.

Soon the stones began to disappear, either because Cosette passed them or they dissolved, and by March 2010, only four tiny uroliths remained. Cosette won’t need surgery!



**Cosette was diagnosed with about 20 calcium oxalate bladder stones. Her diet was changed to a commercial, raw, frozen food and potassium citrate powder was added to her food, and the stones began to disappear. Her most recent X-ray revealed just four tiny stones.**



**BEFORE: Lots of stones**



**AFTER: Just a few stones**

condition, use this under your veterinarian's supervision only as long as there are stones, then discontinue.

Bean does not use either vitamin C or vitamin D (including cod liver oil, which contains vitamin D) because vitamin C is reported to convert to oxalate, thus possibly increasing the risk of stone formation, and vitamin D promotes calcium absorption, which leads to increased urinary calcium. Most multi-vitamins contain vitamins C and D, so it's important to read labels.

Supplements manufactured for human consumption come in a wider variety than do veterinary supplements, making it easier to find human products that avoid these ingredients. Adjust the recommended human dose for your dog by weight.

Some researchers have found that glucosamine supplements, which are commonly used for arthritis, may help prevent calcium oxalate crystals from adhering to the bladder wall. While this treatment is still speculative, glucosamine is safe to give and may be helpful in preventing CaOx bladder stone formation.

When Bean asked Traditional Chinese Medicine veterinarian Cory Stiles, DVM, for advice from that perspective, Dr. Stiles recommended *Lysimachia-3*, a traditional

Chinese blend of three herbs, *Jin Qian Cao* or *Desmodium*, *Hai Jin Sha* or *Lygodium Spores*, and *Ji Nei Jin* or *Gallus*, which is designed to treat human digestive disorders, gall stones, and kidney stones.

"*Lysimachia-3* comes in tablets," says Bean, "which we crushed and mixed with food, or the tablet can be placed in a small amount of low-fat cream cheese, or the dog can simply be 'pilled' by putting it down the throat. My dogs had no objection to having these tablets crushed and mixed with their food, and Lhasas are notoriously picky." Dr. Stiles' recommended dose is 1 tablet per 25 pounds body weight given twice daily until stones are dissolved. Then give *Lysimachia-3* daily for another month, then start using it every other day, then every three days, and if all looks good, dose it three times per week every other week, and finally, daily for one week out of every four to six weeks.

### Preventive medical treatment

Potassium citrate is a nutritional supplement that increases citrate levels in the urine, attracting calcium away from oxalates. When calcium binds to citrate, the resulting calcium citrate tends to remain

dissolved instead of precipitating out as a mineral deposit.

Potassium citrate also has an alkalinizing effect on the urine, which can help to prevent the formation of calcium oxalate stones, though it won't dissolve existing stones. High blood potassium levels are dangerous, so a veterinarian's supervision and follow-up blood tests are recommended when using potassium citrate. This supplement should usually not be given when dietary changes alone maintain the urine's pH at 6.5 or above.

Calcium citrate achieves the same goals of alkalinizing urine and binding oxalates without the risk of elevated potassium that can be posed by potassium citrate. That's why Bean considers calcium citrate a better option for her dogs' homemade diets.

Dogs who continue to form stones despite other steps to minimize risk may be prescribed hydrochlorothiazide, a thiazide diuretic, to increase the amount of urine produced while reducing urinary calcium oxalate saturation.

### The stress connection

In addition to good food and ample water, dogs need a stable home life, active exercise, and interesting activities. Some researchers speculate that stress plays a role in the development of kidney and bladder stones. When changing your dog's diet, do what you can to keep the introduction of new foods fun and stress-free. Fortunately, most dogs love fresh food. Just as importantly, do what you can to relax and let go of the stress that concern about your dog's health brings to your own life. The more you and your best friend enjoy each other's company with play, exercise, and shared quiet moments, the better you'll both feel. 🐾

*Next month: The final installment of our bladder/kidney stone series examines cystine, calcium phosphate, silica, and ammonium urate or uric acid uroliths.*

*CJ Puotinen is the author of The Encyclopedia of Natural Pet Care and other holistic health books. She lives in Montana, and is a frequent contributor to WDJ.*

*San Francisco Bay Area resident Mary Straus has spent more than a decade investigating and writing about canine health and nutrition topics for her website, DogAware.com.*

## Resources Mentioned in This Article

**Calcium citrate powder** from NOW Foods. Sold in natural food stores, by other retailers, and online. (888) 669-3663; NOWfoods.com

**FuzzerFood, Our Experiences with Calcium Oxalates**, by Leslie Bean  
FuzzerFood.net

**K9KidneyDiet**, canine kidney health discussion group. Join at groups.yahoo.com or email K9KidneyDiet@yahogroups.com

**The Low Oxalate Cookbook: Book 2**, edited by Joanne Yount and Annie Gottlieb.  
VP Foundation, 2005. \$32. Available from booksellers.

**Lysimachia-3** from Seven Forests. Available online and through veterinarians.

**Oxalosis and Hyperoxaluria Foundation**. Information about oxalates in foods.  
(800) 643-8699; ohf.org

**pH test strips** from Solid Gold Natural Health for Pets.  
(800) 364-4863; solidgoldhealth.com

**Potassium citrate capsules** from Nature's Pharmacy. Use under veterinary supervision.  
(770) 893-1226; naturespharmacy.com

Healthy control dogs are needed by the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine's Minnesota Urolith Center for clinical trials. Readers living in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area may be interested in a trial testing an oxalate-degrading bacteria that treats calcium oxalate uroliths. As this article goes to press, researchers are looking for three control dogs, a female Pomeranian age 4-8, a male Wirehair Fox Terrier age 11-15, and a male Chihuahua age 8-12. For details about this and other clinical trials at the Center, see [www.cvm.umn.edu/cic/current/samedicine/home.html](http://www.cvm.umn.edu/cic/current/samedicine/home.html).

# The Last Goodbye

*Preparing for and coping with the death of your dog.*

BY LISA RODIER

For many of us, the death of our dog will be the first time that we've experienced the loss of a loved one, human or otherwise. And even for those who have lost a relative, spouse, or close friend, dealing with the death of a beloved dog can be a whole new experience, unleashing a wave of emotions that just might sweep us off our feet. Although no amount of preparation can make the pain disappear, planning ahead for the loss of a pet can allow us to make better decisions and be ready with the right resources should we find ourselves on an emotional roller coaster.

## Thinking ahead

If you have a senior or terminally ill dog, it's a good idea to plan ahead for his passing to ensure a quality death for him, as free from pain and suffering as possible. Advance planning, no matter how difficult,

lets us make better decisions and ensures a "good" death for our dog. Many guardians find they have regrets if they wait and try to make decisions in the throes of emotion. Consider the following well in advance of saying goodbye to your beloved companion:

■ Do you wish for your dog to die an unassisted death at home? Can you provide the 24/7 support and care he needs to be sure that he does not suffer? If the process is relatively controlled – that is, you have received professional veterinary guidance to keep your pet pain-free until his last breath – dying an unassisted death at home involves setting up a quiet and comfortable environment for your pet and removing collars, slings, and braces from his body in advance.

Respect your pet's need to die in peace; stories abound of pets who wait to die until their caregivers leave them alone, preferring a quiet departure to one filled with histrionics.

■ If striving for an unassisted death at home, what is your backup plan if your dog's condition rapidly deteriorates or she is in distress? Know to which veterinary clinic you can take your dog on a moment's notice, any time of day – for euthanasia should it be necessary. Or, find a veterinarian who offers emergency house call service. Alice Villalobos, DVM, and proponent of "pawspice," reminds us that breathing is the most important criterion. If your pet can't breathe comfortably enough to sleep, then there is no quality of life.

■ If you anticipate that euthanasia will be necessary, where do you wish for your pet to be euthanized? At home? In another special place? Explore your options in advance, including interviewing house call veterinarians. For some people, choosing in-home euthanasia allows them to more easily express their emotions, pay tribute to



PHOTO BY JOAN MACDONALD

**When it was time to euthanize her beloved dog Buck, Joan Macdonald looked for a house call veterinarian, to spare the terminally ill dog one more trip to a veterinary hospital.**

the animal, and feel relaxed about spending as much time as they wish, prior to and after their pet passes.

Joan Macdonald, of Atlanta, Georgia, knew in her heart that her 10-year-old, beautiful, black-and-tan German Shepherd, Buck, who was suffering from protein losing enteropathy, would require euthanasia. She says, "I had spoken with a couple of different veterinarians who performed in-home euthanasia about six to eight weeks before Buck's death and selected the person with whom I felt most comfortable. I understood the process well before the day arrived. I had spoken with the vet two days before to assure myself that I knew she would be available."

Macdonald's previous three pets had all died at home; she felt that in-home euthanasia was the most loving option for Buck. "We could be there with him while he was outside in our backyard, a

## What you can do . . .

- Meet with your veterinarian in advance to explore, discuss and understand all of your options regarding end-of-life decisions for your pet.
- Take time to say goodbye to your beloved companion, thank him for all the time you've spent together, and give him permission to go.
- Know that you are not in it alone; don't mitigate nor apologize for your feelings.
- Reach out to get the help you need to begin processing your loss.



place he loved, surrounded by people and animals who loved him. I had dragged him to enough places while battling his illness; the least I could do was to give him a peaceful death surrounded by blue skies and chirping birds.”

■ Do you prefer the option of euthanasia at your dog’s veterinary clinic? Are you comfortable with your veterinarian and her staff, and do you understand the procedure? How does your dog feel about the clinic? If it is a place of stress for her, or if she is very old and relatively immobile, you might wish to consider at-home euthanasia. Or, ask your veterinarian in advance if she would be willing to come out to your car to euthanize the dog, rather than requiring you to bring the dog into the clinic.

When it was time for Dakota, Cathy Maher’s 17-year-old Lhasa Apso-mix to be euthanized, she chose to go to the veterinary clinic, where Dakota was euthanized outside, under a tree, in the nature preserve on the clinic’s grounds. If you prefer to take your dog to the veterinary clinic, consider whether you will need someone there for support – either to stay with you, or at least, to drive you safely to and from the clinic.

■ Do you want to be present for the euthanasia, whether at-home or at the veterinary clinic? If so, understand that the dog can make vocalizations, involuntary movements, and lose bladder or bowel control. This is not unusual, nor is it indicative that the animal is suffering. Whether you are present for the euthanasia or not, experts in the field of pet loss recommend that we, at the least, see our pet’s body before burial or cremation as a way to help us begin to process the loss, and help us to understand that our pet is indeed gone.

■ Do you understand the euthanasia process that the clinic will use? Don’t hesitate to schedule a consult with your veterinarian – perhaps without your dog present – to learn about it. Take the opportunity to ask questions about payment, aftercare arrangements and any other questions you have. Inquire whether the clinic has a special room for euthanasia, and if they allow you to spend time with your dog, both before and after he has been euthanized. Ask if the veterinarian typically performs euthanasia at the end of the day, when the office might be quieter, or at any particular time of day.

The Gwinnett Animal Hospital in

Snellville, Georgia, typically euthanizes pets in “Room 6,” also known as the “Transition Room.” Clinic co-owner, Andrea Haupt, RVT, CVMRT and a Guild Certified TTouch Practitioner, relates that the room is not set up like an exam room; instead, it features soft lighting, comfortable chairs, and a small fountain. Haupt believes that the energy in the room is different, in a good way. After staff have helped an animal to “transition,” a candle is lit and the caregiver is encouraged to spend as much time with her pet as she wishes.

Even if our dogs are healthy or young at the moment, we’d do well to know in advance what our options are lest an accident or serious illness take us by surprise.

Christy Waehner, of Atlanta, Georgia, didn’t have much time to prepare for the death of her seven-year-old Doberman Pinscher, Jones, but previous experiences and her clinic helped guide her decisions. One weekend, Jones became very ill; after taking Jones in and out of the emergency vet clinic for three days, Christy took Jones, clearly failing, back to the Gwinnett Animal Hospital in hopes of finding something that would help him.

Sadly, she soon received a call that they had exhausted all avenues. “I love and respect his veterinarians, as did Jones,” says Waehner. “I have had a dog euthanized at home, and it was very nice. It all depends on the circumstance; Jones was already at the vet clinic. The clinic has a lovely room that has a water fountain Jones always loved. While he and I sat together, he got up and drank out of it just like he



**Burial and a memorial at a pet cemetery can be costly, but some guardians experience precious comfort by visiting such a tangible reminder of their dogs.**

always did. That was special for me. I sat with him for an hour until I felt like he and I were both ready to say goodbye. The vet came in and I held him while she let him go. This has always been a special time for me – being there at the end. It’s a gentle process, and as sad as I am, it’s comforting to know that we’re together as he moves on.”

### Additional considerations

Planning ahead also involves knowing what you wish to do with your pet’s body once he has passed. For some, once the animal is gone, the body is just a shell that remains and the caregiver has no desire to take the body, preferring to remember her companion as he once was. Others find burial or cremation as a means to remember and honor their pets.

■ **Burial:** The least costly option is for the caregiver to take her pet’s body home and bury him, local ordinances and other considerations (i.e., depth needed to properly bury) notwithstanding. One of the more significant downsides to this is today’s very mobile society: many of us don’t live forever in the same place, so leaving a beloved canine companion’s resting place behind might not work for some individuals.

Burial in a pet cemetery is another alternative and many people find the sense of permanence and security reassuring, knowing that even if they move, they will know that their pet’s body will not be disturbed. Having a quiet place to spend time, or to hold a memorial service when the pet is buried, can help with processing the loss. One resource for locating a pet cemetery near you is the International Association of Pet Cemeteries and Crematories (IAOPCC). Figure in pricing for a casket and burial and the total, here in Georgia, can run anywhere from \$300 and up.

■ **Cremation:** Another good reason for planning ahead is to have opportunity to research the company providing the cremation service and feel comfortable that your dog’s body – and you – will be treated with care and compassion. Unfortunately, just as has been the case with human funeral homes, there are unscrupulous pet crematories, too. Keep that in mind when looking for a cremation provider.

Most veterinary clinics offer their clients the choice of a private cremation, wherein a representative from a pet crematory picks up the pet’s body from the



**Christy Waehner didn't have much time to plan for the loss of her dog, Jones. She relied on past experience and the guidance of her veterinarian to make sound end-of-life decisions.**

clinic, cremates the body, then returns the ashes to the clinic or directly to the owner. Ashes might be placed in a simple box or in a more elaborate urn, either picked out by the caregiver, or provided by the crematory. There also exist pet crematories that offer a wide range of services (i.e., chapel, urn gallery, cemetery) to the pet guardian, including allowing the caregiver to bring the pet's body herself to the crematory, and making available a quiet room where she can spend time with her pet before the body is cremated.

Cremated remains (sometimes referred to as "cremains") are commonly called ashes, but the material, comprised of bits of bone, more resembles a gritty sand than wafting ashes. These remains can be memorialized in a pet cemetery, or taken home by the pet's guardian. Some people like to scatter their pets' ashes somewhere special, or have the ashes buried or co-mingled with their own when they die.

"Community cremation" is a lower-cost option to individual cremation, in which the bodies of several pets are cremated together. In this case, the ashes are not returned to the owner.

Both the cost of euthanasia and cremation, and the amount of ashes left after cremation, are dependent on the size of the pet. Private cremations at a local Atlanta pet crematory range from \$160-\$260; community cremations cost less.

When Waehner lost her first dogs several years ago, she had them cremated but didn't take the ashes home with her. She relates, "I had a real separation of 'being' and body and just saw no need to keep ashes." But in the years since, she has elected to take the ashes of her dogs home after they have been cremated. "I decided I wanted something to scatter to the wind. It gave me

a sense of setting them free from a physical body, even though they were no longer in that body and were already free. I realize that it's my sense of freedom for them." She already had a relationship with a local pet crematory – Paws, Whiskers and Wags in Decatur, Georgia – so when Jones died, the vet clinic put his body in Waehner's van. "I kept my hand on his warm body as I drove him to Paws," says Waehner. "For me, this was very comforting."

## Coping with the loss

Judy Rath, a licensed professional counselor (LPC) in St. Simons Island, Georgia, draws on personal experience to counsel clients who have lost pets. She lost Cousteau, her own nine-year-old Briard (and a beloved companion and therapy dog), to a quick battle with cancer. Her husband, Steve, died a mere six months later. I asked her if she could compare the emotional pain of the two experiences; her words echo those of others. "In some ways, the death of Cousteau was worse. Equally, or no less horrendous, at the least, and in some cases, worse." She shares that even Steve, when they lost Cousteau, remarked that he thought his pain was deeper than when his own father had passed away.

The primary issue to understand is that losing a pet is no different than losing a human, and even if you have done okay after the loss of one pet, you might have a whole different experience with losing another. Our relationships with each of our pets is as unique as each our relationships with the various people in our lives. Sandra Barker, PhD, NCC, LPC, reminds pet owners that grief is a natural and normal response to a significant loss, and while painful, it is also a healing process. Some of us will have a harder time dealing with the loss than others.

"So many factors can affect the intensity of our grief response," she says. "These include our previous experiences with death, our physical and mental health and support systems, the circumstances related to the death (was it sudden or was there time to plan, did the pet die naturally or was euthanasia chosen), what the pet symbolized to the owner (companionship, protection, last link to a deceased relative), others' responses to the death (including veterinarians and their staff), and our perception of whether the pet suffered."

Melba Atkinson founded and subsequently led a pet loss support group in Charlottesville, Virginia for eight years.

She says, "As a society, we grieve very poorly. We expect people to move on very quickly. And for a lot of people, they wind up tucking away their feelings inside. If you don't deal with a loss when it happens, sometime in the future it will rear its head, and you'll encounter even more complicated grieving than the first time. Allow yourself to deal with it; don't let social or societal pressure make you think 'It's just a pet; I shouldn't have these feelings.'"

When we experience a loss – and even before – it's important that we acknowledge it and begin processing. Today, a variety of resources are available to help us; the hardest part is admitting that we might need help, and making the effort to avail ourselves of these resources. The one common thread is that whatever we are going through, we are not alone.

■ **Pet support/loss groups.** Attendance at these community-based groups is usually

## Stages of Grief

Decades ago, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross conceived the "five stages of grief" (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance).

Wallace Sife, PhD, founder of the Association of Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB), prefers the term "stages of bereavement," which include shock and disbelief; anger, alienation, and distancing; denial; guilt; depression; and resolution/closure).

Melba Atkinson, who founded and facilitated a pet loss support group, takes things a step further and explains that she prefers the term "dimensions" to "stages" since there is no set order in which we will experience these emotions, we can feel more than one at a time, and they can surprise us – both with their intensity and when we might find ourselves experiencing them.

Whatever model you identify with, keep in mind that grieving the loss of your canine companion can be a long and complicated process. Allow yourself to experience the emotions fully; allow your human and animal friends to care for you as you recover.

free; some ask for a small donation. Your veterinarian might be able to refer you to a group; otherwise, try an online search or contact other pet-related businesses to see if they can provide a reference. Many groups welcome participants who are anticipating the loss of a pet, rather than limiting the group to only those who have already lost pets.

In general, Atkinson says, a group's purpose is neither to judge nor to "fix." These groups are there to offer listening and support, and unless someone asks for advice, it should not be given. All information shared should be in confidence. There should be no pressure for you to speak: if you want to sit and listen, that's fine. "You feel supported even if you don't talk," Atkinson reports, and admits that while a group setting might not be for everyone, it can be comforting to hear others relate stories of experiencing the same feelings that we are, having the same problems sleeping and eating, for example, to let us know that we aren't going crazy.

■ **Pet loss telephone hotlines.** Many organizations, including several veterinary schools, offer grieving individuals the opportunity to speak one-on-one with trained volunteers via telephone. Typically these lines are staffed on certain days, at specific times, and usually are toll calls.

■ **Online chat rooms.** This Internet phenomenon gives us the opportunity to remain relatively anonymous while "chatting" with others who have lost pets. Chats are typically moderated by trained volunteers or therapists. The chat environment can be a little unnerving at first if you are unfamiliar with it, as multiple threads occur simultaneously. Skilled moderators do their best to be sure that no one gets lost or ignored. The Association of Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB) is one group offering chats on a regular schedule. My take on this is that it's a lot easier to type and cry than it is to talk and cry!

■ **Books.** I discovered a number of excellent titles that discuss why our relationships with our pets are so meaningful and why our grief can run so deep when we lose them. I highly recommend reading at least one book on pet loss well *before* it's time to say goodbye to your canine companion. The books create an awareness of a variety of issues to consider, and help the reader begin to do her "emotional homework."

Most books are typically very affordable, but I found that my library system also had a nice selection. Pet support groups (such as Atkinson's) might also maintain a lending library.

■ **Friends.** Some friends will understand while others won't. Seek out those whom you respect and who have dealt with the loss of a pet. Distance yourself temporarily from those who don't seem to understand that your pet was a beloved family member and who tell you to "get over it."

■ **Websites.** Lots of websites offer ideas for processing and dealing with grief. A quick search will turn up a plethora of options. As with anything on the Internet, proceed cautiously and look for credible sources for information.

One-on-one guidance from a therapist or counselor as we prepare for a loss, or afterward, is another option. How do we know whether help from a therapist might become necessary? Dr. Barker answers, "I think a general rule of thumb is when our pain persists over a period of time (such as several weeks) with no improvement. Anyone who experiences suicidal thoughts or whose symptoms significantly interfere with daily functioning should seek professional help as well."

### Spiritually speaking

Our spiritual beliefs can play a part in how we deal with our pet's passing or "transition." Dr. Barker encourages clients to consider how their spiritual beliefs might help them during the difficult grief process. Clients practicing a religious faith may turn to their church, temple, or synagogue for support, or might also seek out other religious/spiritual opinions.

When I spoke with Haupt, she used the term "helping the animal transition" to describe our role in our pet's passing. She believes that animals don't view the transition – which she describes as moving from one life form to another – the way we do, and that our animals, even when physically gone, don't ever leave us.

Rath adds, "*We* have a fear of death. Pets don't fear death, and we have trouble grasping this. We are fear-based as humans; our pets don't have that fear of the next piece of

their existence. We project our emotions on to our dogs. That's where you need to step back and look at the big picture."

In Atkinson's experience, people take comfort from the image that their dogs are waiting for them, and when they die, they'll be reunited. She found that spirituality was important to people and encouraged those in her pet loss support group to feel okay with that. She believes that strong religious and spiritual beliefs might help some deal with loss a little more easily.

But even before our pets die, if we have the opportunity, animal communicator Penelope Smith, author of *Animals in Spirit*, encourages us to "Sit quietly with our animal friends, listening as best you can, making peace with them, going over the life you've had together, and being willing to let them go are the best things to do when it's obvious that life can no longer be sustained." She also says, "If you are also willing to view death as a natural, profound, and even beautiful part of life, it becomes easier for the animal to relax and either get well or leave peacefully. Accept your emotions as they come, but don't put the burden on your animal friends to handle your feelings by requiring them to hang on to life." She explains that while the loss of our canine friend's physical presence is saddening, the connection we have with the animal as spirit helps to put the whole process into perspective.

Wahner says, "I've been raised to believe that there is no death. And this enables me to just know that he [Jones] has transformed his energy from a physical form that I was able to see for seven years, to one that I'm now aware of, but just can't see."

### Give me a sign

Many people talk about signs they receive from their animals, a feeling they get of their animals' presence nearby, or even a dream in which they see their pets as healthy, happy, and whole. Fanna

Easter of Buford, Georgia lost Armond, her nine-year-old, three-legged Bouvier to osteosarcoma.

Four sleepless nights after Armond passed, Easter had a dream about her dog that she says "healed my heart more" than crying. In the dream, Armond was lying down and he was looking up at her. "I had this sense



HeartGlass Studio can incorporate your pet's ashes in a memorial "Memory Sphere."

PHOTO COURTESY OF HEARTGLASS STUDIO



of calm. He looked *beautiful*, as if he had just been groomed and had glitter in his hair. He looked so handsome; he had all four legs, too! I could ‘feel’ him saying, ‘It’s okay, I’m okay, we are all okay. I had to go, it was my time.’ I remember smiling and telling him he could go play.”

Haupt has a solar-powered chime in her home that she says occasionally rings at night, or on overcast days – times when it really shouldn’t be ringing! When this happens, she is certain that her beloved animals (who have transitioned) are stopping in to say hello.

Others consult animal communicators as a means of connecting with their pets’ spirits. “I had a wonderful conversation with Tina Hassett, RN, BSN, who has communicated with my animal companions,” says Waehner. “It was a mixture of much sadness, gentleness, and comfort. I feel that Jones’ energy is still here with me, and occasionally he pops in on conversations with Tina.”

## Remembrances

Memorializing our pets is a means to preserve memories and honor our canine friends, but just as important, it helps us process our loss. Wallace Sife, PhD, and founder of the Association of Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB), tells us that “Rituals can focus, center, and calm us, and convert something painful into something less painful.” Commonly, veterinary clinics or pet crematories will give the caregiver an imprint of a paw taken from the dog after his death, or locks of hair. Beyond that, the list of ideas for remembrances is endless. A few ideas include:

- A memorial service with family and friends featuring songs, eulogies, or even a feast
- Lighting candles
- Planting flowers, trees, or plants
- Writing poetry or music in tribute
- Creating a memorial plaque, photo collage, scrapbook, or diary
- Writing letters to the pet
- Creating a special place in the home that holds the pet’s ashes, photos, flowers, and other mementos such as her collar and ID tags
- Announcements or memorial cards
- Donations to animal-related causes

Some of my favorites include:

- Pam Green of California has a collec-

tion of ashes from the numerous dogs she has loved throughout her life. She searches out unique boxes, suitable for holding ashes, at thrift stores and antique shops. All the boxes are kept on a shelf in her home, lit continuously by a night light.

■ Waehner plans to order a blown glass Memory Sphere from HeartGlass Studio to commemorate Jones. Artists create the spheres incorporating the pet’s ashes, which manifest themselves as a spiral of white particles and bubbles running through the glass. Waehner says that the sphere will be “a reminder of all of Jones’ lovely qualities that made my life better for having him in it.”

■ Maher, every day, wears a beautiful pendant that holds a small amount of Dakota’s ashes.

■ Paws, Whiskers, & Wags brings together clients at their annual “Celebration of Life” memorial, featuring a slide show of their pets – and lots of tissues! This year’s event was attended by 300 people.

## Lessons learned

Planning for, and subsequently dealing with, the loss of a beloved canine com-

panion is possibly one of the hardest, most painful situations we’ll encounter. Preparing for the loss will be difficult, but might be the best decision you can make to help your friend transition peacefully and with honor.

Once he is gone, and your pain omnipresent, remember that with the gift of time, you will recover and the pain will lessen or go away, though wonderful memories will remain.

Waehner says, “While you never completely forget the pain of loss, there comes a time when the soft chorus of joyful memories is the stronger song that plays in your heart.”

And Maher, who thought that it would be a long while before a “new” dog graced the doorstep of her home, found herself welcoming Dugan, a sweet, troubled stray, rescued by her sister, into her family a few months after she lost Dakota. “I learned that even though I lost the dog love of my life and my heart was broken, our hearts do heal and can expand to accept and love another pet.” 🐾

*Lisa Rodier lives in Alpharetta, Georgia, with her husband and two Bouviers, and volunteers with the American Bouvier Rescue League.*

## Resources Mentioned in This Article

### BOOKS

*Coping with Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet*, by Moira Anderson Allen, MEd

*Grieving the Death of a Pet*, by Betty J. Carmack

*The Loss of a Pet*, by Wallace Sife, PhD

*Animals in Spirit*, by Penelope Smith

### ASSOCIATIONS/SUPPORT

**International Association of Pet Cemeteries & Crematories (IAOPCC)**

Ellenburg Depot, NY. (518) 594-3000; iaopc.com

**The Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement (APLB)**

Brooklyn, NY. (718) 382-0690; aplb.org

**The Argus Institute (Colorado State University)**

Fort Collins, CO. (970) 297-1242; argusinstitute.colostate.edu

### SUPPLIERS AND SERVICES

**HeartGlass Studio**, Golden, CO. (720) 229-0605; heartglasstudio.com

**Ashes to Ashes**, Santa Ana, CA. (714) 542-4115; ashestoashes.com

**Tina Hassett’s Animal Allies**, Tina Hassett, RN, BSN

Webster, MA. (508) 949-1487; ouranimalallies.com

**Paws, Whiskers & Wags**, Decatur, GA. (404) 370-6000; pawswiskersandwags.com

**Gwinnett Animal Hospital**, Snellville, GA. (770) 972-0447; gwinnettanimalhospital.com

# Swimming for a Living

*“Water work” sports are for aquatic service dogs!*

BY TERRY LONG

The curly brown dog stamped his feet and stared at his handler. He had retrieved the plastic dummy countless times. Now what? Something as simple as that look is all it took to start Kathryn Monroe of Mahtomedi, Minnesota, on a quest. It would ultimately take her across the country in search of the knowledge and skills to train her Portuguese Water Dog, Gaucho, to do what his breeding dictated. Work. Water work, specifically.

“Gaucho was the kind of pup we all dream of,” remembers Monroe. “Attentive to humans, determined to retrieve. He forced me to examine what else I could do to keep up with him. This was before there was a Portuguese Water Dog Club of America (PWDCA) water trial. There were only hunting trials for the organized sports world, rescue trials for Newfoundlands, and, for the rest of us, throwing a stick on the beach. So I had a lot of work to do to understand what the PWD did historically, and how it could be reflected in today’s sports. Gaucho was a willing guinea pig!”

## History

Like many people, Monroe had gotten involved with a breed because she was looking for a dog with an affinity for something she loved. Monroe is a boater. When asked if she had water sports in mind when she chose a PWD, she said, “Water sports? I hate water sports! I don’t swim, and I don’t like to be cold and wet. I love to be *on* the water, but not *in* the water. I love to sail and ran a sailboat dealership for many years. And I *do* love dogs. I just wanted a dog that liked boats. I figured since I didn’t swim, my dog should know how to.”

And the rest is truly history since Gaucho went on to become Ch Glad Tidings do Mar, CD, WWD (Working Water Dog), multiple year Top Ten PWDCA producer, POM (Producer of Merit), ROM (Registry of Merit). And for her part, Monroe was

instrumental in developing the PWDCA water trial standards. Monroe must have a lot of working lines in her own DNA since it took her, along with several other dedicated PWD owners, more than six years to finalize the standards that were finally approved in December of 1990. The first PWDCA trials took place in 1991 in Connecticut, Minnesota, and Washington.

Some of the standards for the PWDCA water work trials were inspired by another breed’s trial standards. The Newfoundland Club of America’s (NCA) standards had been approved back in 1972. Although the focus of NCA trials is on human rescue, the retrieve work is similar, as well as the requirement that dogs work from both land and water.

## Competition

The requirements for titling your dog in water work differ depending upon the dog’s breed. Although there are a couple of avenues available to people with other

breeds or mixed breeds (see contact information for Canine Water Sports and Dog Scouts of America on page 21), most water work standards are based on either the PWDCA or the NCA.

For example, the PWDCA’s first trial level could be considered a “certificate of readiness,” which assesses a dog’s interest in water tasks, as well as basic teamwork. Each of the next three levels test more advanced skills. Monroe explains how the PWDCA trial standards were developed: “The PWD trials boast a singular suitability for this breed and its work. Every exercise in the titling levels is a useful task. The model is of teamwork and crew rather than dog and master. Teams have latitude in style, as long as the job gets done. Judging assesses achievement. The rules deal only with safety, equalizing physical differences, and making the task easier to judge. The task is either completed or not, pass or fail.”

### SNAPSHOT OF THE SPORT:



- **What is this sport?** Dogs and handlers work together to demonstrate the water work for which the dogs were bred: rescue work or working alongside fishermen.
- **Prior training required?** Minimal.
- **Physical demands?** On the dog: Moderate, until the higher levels of competition are reached. Then, high. On the handler: Moderate.
- **Best-suited structure?** Many dogs can enjoy water work, although the dogs bred specifically for the work (such as Newfies and PWDs) do best.
- **Best-suited temperament?** Dogs who love to work and who love water.
- **Cost?** Moderate.
- **Training complexity?** Moderate.
- **Mental stimulation?** High.
- **Physical stimulation?** High.
- **Recreational opportunities?** Depends on where you live (you need a lake or body of water, preferably not infested with alligators or sharks).
- **Competition opportunities and venues?** Moderate.

“The pinnacle of the PWDCA water trial is the Courier Water Dog level, in which the dog works from the boat in a compelling display of its history. The dog delivers a message pouch to another boat and returns with the reply; it swims to shore to locate and retrieve a line of floats. The dog executes a double, directed retrieve in the order determined by the judge based on conditions at the time of the trial, and it pulls a fishing net from one boat to another.

“By far the most difficult task is the next one. When nets are in place, they float beneath the water’s surface, extending a hidden hazard that could foul the rudders and nets of other boats in the area. Traditionally, marker buoys are set to designate the net’s trailing edge. In the final task of the water trial, the dog follows a complex chain of commands: jump off the boat; return to the handler; grasp a large marker buoy by the attached rope; turn and swim

75 feet away in the direction indicated, beyond the course boundaries into unmarked water; and drop the ball when signaled to do so. The dog must leave the marker in place and return to the handler.”

Clearly, these dogs are not just good-looking. As with many other working breeds, people sometimes purchase PWDs without understanding how much energy they have and how much training is required to keep their minds and their bodies busy. Beware!

## Training

Karrie Cook has owned five Newfoundlands over the past 13 years, four of whom have been rescues. Although she always took her dogs swimming, she didn’t know where to start to train for water work. She began by helping out at water tests as a “steward” to learn more about it, did a lot of reading, and eventually joined the Newfoundland Club of Southern California

(NCSC). Stewards fulfill a variety of roles including moving gear around, holding dogs, rowing boats, assisting judges, placing articles for retrieving, etc.

“I learned a lot from mentor-level trainers and through offering to steward and help out at tests. Many of the exercises and pre-training of ‘take,’ ‘hold,’ and ‘give’ can be done on land and then transferred to the water. Prior to transferring learned skills to the water, your dog needs to clearly understand ‘take,’ ‘hold,’ and ‘give’ as three distinctly different tasks. These commands are fundamental to successful water training.

“In addition, your dog needs a good foundation in basic obedience as all three levels of NCA water tests are completed off-leash. The junior level test includes a basic control section (i.e., heel off-lead, recall, and one-minute down).”

Monroe, with the PWDs, had her work cut out for her as well, figuring out how

## It Looks Like Fun, But It Really Is Work

The first thing one discovers from talking to people who work their Newfoundlands or Portuguese Water Dogs in the water is that this is work. Although some would call it a water sport, they would beg to differ. Their dogs are *working dogs*, and work is what they have been bred to do. Yes, these dogs are handsome, affectionate, and playful, but when they are in the water, they are working. And their water trials are uniquely designed to demonstrate the skills for which they were bred.

For more detailed information about specific tests performed in a water trial, see page 21 for specific organizations that have established test standards.

There are two major categories of water work. One is rescue work, performed by Newfoundlands (Newfies) and the other is working alongside fishermen, performed by Portuguese Water Dogs (PWDs).



PHOTO BY TRISTA HILDAGO, DYNAMICDOGPHOTO.COM

As part of a “courier” test, Susan Cucura, of Los Angeles, California, cues her 10-year-old PWD, Viva, to jump off a boat in a water retrieving exercise.

■ **Rescue work:** Focuses on swimming to the aid of a human in distress and coming to the rescue of stranded boaters. Skills tested in water trials include:

- Swimming to a person who grabs the harness of the dog and towing the person to shore or to a boat
- Swimming to an “unconscious victim” and bringing them to a boat or to shore
- Underwater retrieves
- Jumping off a boat to retrieve objects overboard (cushions, life jackets)
- Taking life rings and knotted lines to “victims”

■ **Working with fishermen:** Focuses on work from land or boat to aid fishermen. Skills include:

- Carrying messages between boats
- Placing buoys to mark nets
- Towing nets and placing them as directed
- Underwater retrieves
- Retrieve objects overboard so fishing nets and ropes don’t become tangled by them
- Carrying gear between boats and to shore

## Obie to the Rescue . . . Times Three!

Eeeny, meeny, miney, moe. To which drowning victim do I go, thought Obie, the seven-year-old male Newfoundland. Decisions, decisions. No time to waste, these folks are all in distress and my person cued me to go to the rescue, confident that I can do what we've trained to do. S-P-L-A-S-H!

It is the "multiple person rescue" exercise of the Water Rescue Dog, Excellent division (WRDX), of a Newfoundland Club of America (NCA) water trial. Handler and dog are in a boat 150 feet from shore. Three "victims" swim out to locations varying between 75-100 feet from shore with 35 feet between each victim. At the judge's signal, the handler cues her dog to go to the rescue and the dog has 15 seconds to launch out of the boat and six minutes to "save" all three victims by bringing them back to the boat. The dog can save the victims one at a time, two at once, or all three at once.

Karrie Cook of Huntington Beach, California, watches proudly as her hero displays the strength and brains she loves about the Newfoundland. Obie first makes a beeline to the victim on the right.

Without breaking stride, he then swims to the one in the center and then, yes, to the victim on the left and brings them all in at once. That's her boy! Karablue's Ocean Breeze.

"Most dogs I've seen complete this exercise by picking up one victim at a time and returning that person to the boat prior to getting another victim," says Cook. "Although he doesn't always do it this way, Obie usually jumps from the boat, swims to the victim on the right, then to the center victim, then to the victim on the left, and then brings all three victims back in one trip.



**Obie tows a volunteer "victim," who holds onto his harness, back to a boat. Rescue dogs are taught to grasp the hand of an "unconscious victim" in their mouths and tow them to shore.**

"I think he's learned that this is the quickest and most efficient way for him to complete this exercise. It's very cool to watch and shows that he can problem-solve this exercise and complete it with very little guidance from me. He's a very amazing dog and I know that he would be able to complete a real rescue should the need ever arise."

That's what it's all about for water work fanatics: knowing that their dog could actually do real-life work.

to train for the skills that she had helped establish as part of the PWD water work standards. "I really had started out just wanting a pal to go sailing with me, and the world of dogs and titling events seemed rather stylized and competitive; I got enough of that on the sailing circuit, thank you very much. I wanted to work *with* my dog, not just command him to fetch and carry.

"Gaucho quickly let me know that traditional 'jerk and praise' or forced retrieve methods were not going to work at all. Play training was not demanding enough for him. Lucky for me, Joan Telfer, a tracking judge, introduced me to clicker training. This was the ticket: specific parameters for the goal, building on progress that meets the canine learning style, and positive enough to be comfortable for me. With this method, Gaucho figured he was training me quite well!"

Back in those early days of PWD water work, there were no classes. Monroe continued to learn from others and adapted training to fit water work and ended up giving classes and workshops herself. "I figured out how to break down the tasks into each part, train that part, and then chain them together. Then I trained other

trainers. As a judge, it's really fun to see an exhibitor I've never met using a technique that I pioneered and taught to others!"

These days, many local breed clubs offer training. Monroe believes that a lot of training that people have done with other sports can be transferred to water work because it's the relationship with your dog that is the foundation for the teamwork required. She has had Standard Schnauzers, Poodles, Border Terriers, Vizlas, Boxers, and many other breeds do quite well in her basic water work seminars.

### Team attributes

Water work will appeal to people who want something fun to do with their dogs, and who enjoy the relationship that develops from training to higher and higher levels of accomplishment with their canine partner. It is relatively easy to get started in water work, but watch out! Although attaining foundation water work skills is satisfying, the bond that develops during training and working can be addictive. Many in this sport say it is the lifelong work together, learning advanced skills and rising to increasing challenges that keeps them coming back for more.

"The PWD Water Trial," says Monroe,

"is intentionally staged so that the beginning certificate is easy to try to see if you like it, with a minimum investment of time and money and, second, so that each level builds on the skills mastered in the level before it. So when you start with the Junior Certificate, the way you train lays the foundation for the pinnacle title, the Courier Water Dog Title. Somewhere along the way, the satisfaction of working with your dog means more than the titles, but the titles give you clear goals to reach for."

The most physically demanding aspect of this sport for people is hauling gear, including boats, nets, crates, and float lines. Since handlers can wear life jackets, you don't have to be a good swimmer. Monroe believes that doing something you love with your dog is the most important human attribute.

"The people who will stick with water work are those with a sense of humor, a sense of adventure, a love of seeing their dog light up over his or her own success, and people who are willing to help; water trials and their preparation take lots of manpower. Some of my best and longest friendships arose from coming together over our mutual love of schlepping around in the water with our dogs."

Cook, the Newfie owner, concurs. “I love watching the natural instincts and intelligence of this breed in the water. I’m an animal person *and* a people person so I enjoy training the dogs and spending a beautiful day out on the lake with friends who share similar interests. We all have memories of funny times, frustrating times, and great accomplishments with our dogs. It’s pretty amazing seeing how much a dog can learn and achieve over the course of a summer of training.”

If you are thinking about getting a dog that will excel at water work, look for a dog whose structure *and* temperament are well suited. Monroe is a qualifier of the PWDCA Outstanding Breeder Achievement Award, which recognizes combined health, conformation, and performance achievement of dogs produced. She insists that temperament is paramount in choosing your dog.

“The frenetic dog is fun to watch, but harder to train. The dog who doesn’t have a strong desire to work for its human will have a tendency to run around on the beach, not deliver to hand, and not retrieve articles in the correct order, etc. I describe the ideal as ‘workmanlike.’”

Dogs who excel at water work need

both the temperament and the structure to perform the wide variety of physically demanding tasks involved. Although swimming is a low-impact activity that helps develop overall fitness and aerobic capacity, there is risk of injury. “Swimmers tail,” also known as “dead tail,” is when the tail droops and cannot wag. It typically happens in the spring when the water hasn’t yet warmed to summer temperatures and the dogs are not yet in peak condition. It goes away in a couple of days, but has surprised handlers who are not familiar with the syndrome.

Dogs can also get hurt getting back into the boat after an exercise. Care must be given to support the dog’s effort and not to grab and drag the dog up into the boat, which can cause bruising. That said, water work provides a pretty safe working environment for dogs even later in life when other activities become too difficult.

Monroe remembers two dogs who achieved PWDCA titles at advanced ages. “We’ve had dogs earn their Courier title at the age of 10, and others whose handlers are severely arthritic. We’ve had veteran dogs with Addison’s disease competing at the Working level. I once saw a UDX [an advanced competition obedience title] dog,

13 years old and totally deaf, get his Apprentice title based totally on hand signals. There wasn’t a dry eye on the beach that day. I saw a retired brood bitch get her Junior Certificate at the age of 11.

“In short, like swimming for humans, water work is a ‘lifetime sport’ for our canine buddies.”

## Equipment and expenses

The biggest challenge of this sport is finding a body of water large enough that allows dogs. “Believe it or not,” said Cook, “I think the biggest challenge in training for this sport in Southern California is finding a body of water in which to train the dogs. City and county regulations are becoming more and more stringent, and most areas in Southern California do not allow dogs to swim. It is also necessary to have a rowboat with a platform, as well as a number of volunteers, since most of the exercises either involve a boat or people in the water.”

Water work equipment includes a special harness that has rings attached for people to grab in rescue exercises by Newfies, while the PWDs use a tracking-style harness to ensure that the dog doesn’t get choked while working. Other miscellaneous items include fishing lines, retrieving dummies (called bumpers in some sports), life jackets, boat seat cushions, and life rings and knotted lines used in rescue work and, of course, water shoes for you. Monroe advises budgeting about \$100 to start, \$200 for general equipment expenses at the advanced levels, and much more if you need a boat outfitted with a working platform.

Training classes and workshops, when you can find them, can be invaluable. Workshops can cost \$150 for a two-day workshop and classes can run \$100 for a series of six classes. Clubs usually provide practices and “run throughs” for a minimal contribution from members. Trial fees run between \$25-\$40 per entry.

The best way to get started in water work is to offer to get involved in local practices. It takes a lot of people for this sport. By helping out, you learn as you build bonds with both people and dogs. And that’s what it’s all about, isn’t it? 🐾

*Terry Long, CPDT, is a writer, agility instructor, and behavior counselor in Long Beach, CA. She lives with four dogs and a cat and is addicted to agility and animal behavior. See page 24 for contact info.*

## Further Information Resources

Many excellent websites do not provide phone numbers to contact them for more information, preferring to field inquiries by e-mail. We provided numbers when they were available.

### SANCTIONING ORGANIZATIONS AND CLUBS

**Spanish Water Dog Club** (international club)  
[swdclub.org/SpanishWaterWork.htm](http://swdclub.org/SpanishWaterWork.htm)

**Portuguese Water Dog Club of America**  
West Coast: Susan Cucura, (310) 391-9991. East Coast: Jane Freeman, (860) 678-7555. Southeast: Judy Leather, (706) 788-9734.  
[pwdca.org/activities/waterwork](http://pwdca.org/activities/waterwork)

**Canine Water Sports** (all dogs)  
[caninewatersports.com](http://caninewatersports.com)

**Dog Scouts of America** (all dogs)  
[dogscouts.org/Badges\\_water.html](http://dogscouts.org/Badges_water.html)

### BOOKS

**Water Work, Water Play: A Training Guide for Newfoundland Water Rescue Work**, by Judi Adler (1992).

**Gun Dog: Revolutionary Rapid Training Method**, by Richard A. Wolters and John W. Randolph (1961). Although this book may contain some training techniques we do not agree with, there is a good description of assisting dogs into a boat.

**Clicker Training for Obedience**, by Morgan Spector, 1999. Contains some great modules for basic obedience training that are used in water work.

# Don't Villify Surgery

*A rehab veterinarian appreciates our article on "conservative management," but feels we dismissed the value of surgery.*

*We received the following long – but very informative – letter from Evelyn Orenbuch, DVM, the vice president of the American Association of Rehabilitation Veterinarians. It helps further our readers' education about their options for treating canine CCL injuries.*

I was excited to read "Saying 'No' to Surgery" (WDJ February 2010) about "conservative management" for ligament injuries. As a veterinarian who has practiced only physical rehabilitation for the past seven years, I am encouraged to see any article describing its benefits. Author CJ Puotinen was quite thorough in her list of treatments and supplements that can and should be included in a conservative management regime. However, I was distressed by a few points in the article.

When discussing surgical options, the author starts out by telling the story of a dog owner who was warned away from the tibial plateau leveling osteotomy (TPLO) method by Dr. Gail Smith at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine. I realize that this story was simply a discussion of what the dog owner experienced, but it leaves readers believing that TPLO surgery should be avoided.

If one were to look further, one would see that the surgeons at UPenn are almost completely alone in their objections to TPLO surgery. I am pretty sure that UPenn's veterinary college is the only one in the country (there are 28 of them) that does not teach this method. I have attended Dr. Smith's lectures and have seen his line drawings of vectors and forces to the knee and his physics explanation of why it doesn't work. The problem is, in an actual animal (not just the drawing), it *does* work and it works well. Many dogs in this country have received this surgery and have not only returned to being happy comfortable pets but also returned to full athletic competition.

In the sidebar titled "Surgical Options," the author quotes a study done by Dr. Mike Conzemius et. al., in which the authors studied limb function after various surgical techniques for ruptured cranial cruciate ligaments with injury to the medial meniscus. Although the author's citation is accurate, it is not complete. The study was not intended to prove that surgery was or was not an option. It appears that Ms. Puotinen used it to show why conservative management is a good idea. This could not be farther from the point of the study.

The authors of the study were quoted in the article as saying, "We did not include a group that was treated with nonsurgical management because it has been well established that large-breed dogs have poor outcome with this treatment." The study compared normal dogs to post-op CCL dogs. It did *not* compare dogs who were treated with conservative management to those who experienced surgery.

If you were to put a dog treated conservatively on a force plate six months post-injury (as was done in the study) there would still not be 100 percent weight-bearing on that limb. Also, although the number of dogs who returned to "normal function" seems low, realize that all of the dogs improved; they just did not have equal weight bearing of the hind legs.

Even the authors state, "Our finding that the gait of most dogs six months after surgery was more abnormal than normal was surprising, because although we did not formally document owners' impressions of outcome, it was our opinion that most owners thought their dogs functioned acceptably as pets. If this is true, one could conclude that our definition of a clinically important improvement was too rigorous." In other words, the owners of most of these dogs will tell you that six months post-op, their dogs look good and play well. A force plate is an extremely sensitive tool and can pick up even the smallest of differences in weight-bearing.

Post-op physical rehabilitation was recommended to all owners in this study but was not documented or followed. I would suggest that this is probably the most important key to returning a dog to full function post-op. If a dog has three strong legs and one weak one, he will continue to overutilize the good legs. It is only when you press the issue through exercises and rehab that you can get him to be more balanced in his gait. So, because we do not know which dogs followed a post-op rehab protocol, we cannot know if that affected the study.

Finally, the study looked at these dogs six months after surgery. According to their owners, they are functional. Where would they be in another six months? I think we all expect things to heal instantly just because we put effort into it. The body can only do so much. The tissues need to repair, regrow, and find new ways of function. Even the woman quoted at the end of the article said that her own ACL tear took 10 months to heal.

## Two additional points

1. Early in the article, the author mentions that the medial buttress is evidence that there is arthritis. This is incorrect.

The medial buttress is a buildup of heavy fibrous tissue on the top part of the tibia. It is often believed to be the body's response to the instability of the joint after the tear of the CCL but has been found to be present even before instability is found. It has no correlation to the amount or existence of arthritis inside the joint. I have seen many X-rays of canine stifles in which I can feel a large medial buttress but see no arthritis. All dogs who receive conservative treatment will develop this but it is not in and of itself cause for alarm.

2. Ms. Puotinen brings up the issue of bone cancer in some dogs after receiving a TPLO. Let's try not to demonize the

**Letter continued on back cover**

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## RESOURCES

### HOLISTIC VETERINARIANS

**American Holistic Veterinary Medical Association (AHVMA)**, 2214 Old Emmorton Road, Bel Air, MD 21015. (410) 569-0795. Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope for a list of holistic vets in your area, or search [ahvma.org](http://ahvma.org)

### BOOKS

WDJ Training Editor Pat Miller is author of *The Power of Positive Dog Training*; *Positive Perspectives: Love Your Dog, Train Your Dog*; *Positive Perspectives II: Know Your Dog, Train Your Dog*; and *Play with Your Dog*. All of these books are available from DogWise, (800) 776-2665 or [dogwise.com](http://dogwise.com)

*The Encyclopedia of Natural Pet Care* and *Natural Remedies for Dogs and Cats*, by WDJ contributor CJ Puotinen, are available from

DogWise, (800) 776-2665 or [dogwise.com](http://dogwise.com). Puotinen is also author of several books about human health including *Natural Relief from Aches and Pains*, available from your favorite bookseller.

### TRAINING AND INSTRUCTION

**Terry Long**, CPDT, DogPACT, Long Beach, CA. Terry is a writer, agility instructor, and behavior counselor. She provides pre-adoption counseling, behavior modification, and group classes in pet manners and agility. (562) 423-0793; [dogpact.com](http://dogpact.com)

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## LETTER CONTINUED FROM PAGE 22

surgery here. Yes, there were a few cases of this. There appears to have been a batch of poorly manufactured bone plates that corroded and caused a slightly higher incidence of bone cancer in dogs who had received these plates. However, these issues have been addressed and since then there have not been any studies to definitively correlate TPLO surgery with bone cancer. Remember that the proximal tibia is not an uncommon area to get bone cancer and any time you disrupt an area, you can turn on the genes for cancer expression.

Surgery is not the only or even the best route. Conservative treatment can be the best choice for many and I commend WDJ for taking on this topic, but it is important not to condemn surgery as a treatment for CCL injuries. It is the best option for the majority of dogs and their owners; *the most important thing is to find the right surgeon*. Find someone who will look at your dog as a whole. What does your dog do for a living? How big or small is he? How old? How sensitive to surgical anesthetics? How severe are the signs? Is he three-legged lame or just bearing less weight on the affected leg? Many more questions need answers.

One last point. I am the vice-president for the American Association of Rehabilitation Veterinarians (AARV). Author Lisa Rodier interviewed me for your article "Canine Rehab? Go, Go, Go" (September 2009). One of the major issues discussed in

that article is that we need to make sure that when we talk about physical rehabilitation in animals we do *not* call it physical therapy (PT). PT can be performed only by a licensed physical therapist. There are many animal rehabilitation practitioners working on our animals today and most of them are not PTs.

A veterinarian – preferably a rehab-trained veterinarian – should oversee the treatments of any animal receiving physical rehabilitation. If we call it PT, we potentially lose its importance. This may seem like only semantics but believe me, this is a big deal. Veterinarians and PTs together make an awesome team. Many rehab clinics employ PTs and can't imagine working without them. But, ultimately it is a part of veterinary medicine and therefore should be called animal physical rehabilitation.

I commend you again for highlighting the importance of conservative management as an option for dogs with CCL tears. I recently attended one of the largest veterinary conferences in the world, the North American Veterinary Conference. We had an entire day devoted to veterinary rehabilitation and as part of that, there was a full lecture on conservative management of the CCL patient. The room was almost completely full. Many veterinarians realize that surgery is not the only option and many were looking for answers to give owners who choose to say "no" to surgery.

Evelyn Orenbuch, DVM, CCRT, CAVCA, CVA (pending)  
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