

How to use a Dog Muzzle

Let's break down the barriers! Muzzles for dogs come in a big variety of types and their use covers a really wide range of purposes. It's not all about dogs biting! And we think it is a real shame that anyone should ever feel judged or embarrassed about muzzling their dog.

In fact, the handler who protects their dog, whether it means using a muzzle or any other means is a responsible dog owner/handler so well done! At some point in life, many dogs may have to wear a muzzle so teaching them to be comfortable in one is actually a fantastic life skill for all dogs to have. Imagine that the first time a dog meets a muzzle is the time he/she is already stressed out at the Vets. Better to be comfy using one before that day?

In Western Australia there are laws specifically related to muzzles for Greyhounds and we advise all owners to check with their councils or the governing bodies and/or Greyhound rescues regarding the requirement for muzzles and the green-collar testing which allows a Greyhound to be muzzle free.



There are also legal requirements for any dog of any breed in Western Australia that has been classified as a Dangerous Dog, to wear a muzzle when outside of its enclosure and the Dog Act 1976 outlines the regulations.

Outside of these situations, muzzles can also be highly valuable tools for so many moments in a dog's life such as:

- Preventing them from being able to eat something unsafe or inappropriate at the beach, camping or while visiting a new place.
- Keeping everyone safe when in a highly stressful situation like boarding, vet visits, moving house, being handled by a stranger.
- Preventing any reactive bites when learning new social skills like being with other dogs, learning to play or having to suddenly travel in a vehicle with another dog they don't know.
- Ensuring safety when introducing a new family member like a cat/rabbit/chook/sheep etc.
- Sometimes, but only for short & supervised periods, they can also stop a dog from biting or chewing at itself to self soothe a wound or allergy.

Picture this

Sometimes a dog has trigger points where it cannot contain its fear and has a bite history. What if instead of just keeping everyone separate, we could let the nervous dog experience life in the company of other calm dogs, but still prevent the risk of injury from a bite? Yes, there might be growls and definitely nerves, but no bite. Enter, the value of a muzzle. The muzzle in this instance is being used to keep everyone safe whilst the nervous dog learns to be around another even when it triggers. And yes, muzzles can be used in conjunction with a head halter.

Muzzles can help a nervous dog be in the company of other dogs whilst they learn about life in many ways, and prevent injury. In this photo, the muzzled dog is learning to play with another dog whilst being prevented from exercising a previous behaviour of tipping over threshold and pinning the playmate. By using a muzzle over many play sessions, the energy level is dropping as the dog learns new skills and builds 'good memory bank deposits'.



Types of muzzles:

There is a wide variety of muzzles and they suit different needs.

Mesh or Wrap Muzzles:



These muzzles are generally used for very short term wear and may be for a vet or grooming treatment. They 'hold' the dog's snout & mouth closed and whilst the animal can breathe, they generally can't drink or eat with them on.

Baskerville Muzzles:



There are different styles and materials in these products from a wire 'cage type' to hardened plastic to soft silicone to plastic 'basket' types. These muzzles allow the dogs to pant freely, drink and take treats and are better for times where the dog will be in the muzzle for longer periods.

A key point to remember though is 'fit for purpose'!

If you are using a muzzle to allow a dog to experience life or prevent licking at a wound or hotspot, a softer material can be fine. Having a dog learning to relax in the presence of another dog by falling asleep in a muzzle means a softer, more flexible 'cage' is fine.

But, if you are using the muzzle to have a nervous or reactive dog interact with other dogs, having a flexible material means the sides can push in and teeth can protrude and injure! The wire or hardened plastic types are much safer in those instances because the worst that should happen is a bang not a bite. The last thing you want is for the muzzle to squish in and allow a tooth to drag an ear or snout of the other dog. This is where the hardened materials matter most.

For beach walks where the dog might happen upon a blowfish or when camping, again the hardened materials matter for safety. If a muzzle is soft and can be squashed in any way, so too, the dog can manipulate it whilst wearing it.

Fitting a muzzle:

It will feel odd for any owner to start their dog on a muzzle but it does need to be the right size and should fit snugly with the nostrils sitting comfortably. A muzzle that is too big can become ineffective fast. The Baskerville types are shaped to allow the dog's mouth to open and hang slightly free to allow panting. Check the dog from the side view to ensure that their face is not too squished in but also, that the muzzle isn't moving around too easily.



Training a dog into wearing a muzzle:

Ideally, we should consider muzzle training just another 'life-skill' like sitting before food or at a roadside. If we just throw the dog into a muzzle and expect them to go 'no worries' we probably will find failure. Start by using a really high-value treat like shredded BBQ chicken, tiny cheese cubes or whatever their treat kryptonite is and only use that for the muzzle training sessions. This video link shows the simple steps to build confidence and familiarity with the muzzle. Practice a step at a time each day or twice a day and build up to the point where the dog knows exactly what to do when the muzzle comes out and is not fazed at all by wearing it when walking. Remember to keep those high value treats for the outside walks too so the dog actually associates the muzzle wearing with something fantastic.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8chD4eIVwuc>

If you do have a nervous or reactive dog that needs to wear a muzzle, do all the training steps and outside walks away from other dogs for as long as is needed for the dog to be 100% muzzle confident. That way, when you start to bring exposure to its life-fears back into view whilst wearing a muzzle, the muzzle itself won't be an issue and both you and your dog can focus on practicing the new skill build of 'relax', 'turn', 'leave it' or however you are managing that reactive response.

A muzzle alone is not enough to help a reactive or nervous dog overcome fear-based responses to agitant stimuli so seeking the guidance of a trained behaviourist is advised. Muzzles also should not be used on dogs left alone for long periods or as a deterrent to barking or chewing for unsupervised dogs.

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CAVERSHAM • 9377 1270 • Cnr Benara Rd & Lord St
KELMSCOTT • 9390 4290 • 8/2938 Albany Hwy
MALAGA • 9249 3125 • 3/673 Marshall Rd
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