

Keeping Your Pets Occupied in Cold Weather

By Kelly Alver, Reprinted from Our Companions Magazine, Fall 2012



The weather outside may be frightful, but don't let that prevent you and your pets from enjoying winter. There are plenty of indoor and outdoor activities you can participate in to exercise your pets to keep them healthy and entertained.

Marie Joyner, Our Companions canine operations director, offers these tips to help you exercise your dog's body and mind during the winter months.

Give your dog interactive toys. The Buster cube, the Kong or the Tug-a-Jug are great toys that can be used to entertain your dog inside for hours. High-energy dogs can use the Buster cube (available through www.bustercube.com) or the Tug-a-Jug (available through www.animalbehaviorassociates.com) to eat their meals while getting some exercise at the same time. These toys can help enrich a dog's environment and are good for single dogs, or if you have multiple dogs without resource guarding issues. Hide a treat in a Kong toy (available through www.kongcompany.com) and your dog will burn some energy trying to reach the treat.

Play fetch with your dog. Not only can fetch be played outdoors, but it's also a great game to play indoors. If you have a basement or a long hallway, you can use these spaces to play fetch with your dog inside. To be safe, clear your basement or hallway before playing fetch or other indoor games.

Play hide n' seek or tag with your dog. These games can be enjoyed outside or even inside if you have some space in your home. Dogs have fun "chasing" you, being chased and "caught." You can use food treats to reward your dog when you catch him or when he catches you. These types of games strengthen your bond with your dog and also help build your dog's recall ability. In addition, these games provide mental stimulation for your dog.

Take your dog on a walk or a hike. Connecticut features a lot of interesting trails and parks that are dog-friendly. They aren't as crowded in winter, so it's the perfect time to help your dog burn off some energy. Our Companions also holds a one-hour Walking Club every Sunday afternoon at 3 p.m. during the winter. There are two alternating locations – one east of the Connecticut River and the other west of the river. Dogs that walk well on a leash are welcome to join the group. Dogs that need to work on their leash-walking skills can attend Our Companions' first- or second-level obedience classes, which are held on Sundays in the winter. Contact Marie at Our Companions (860) 242-9999, ext 317 for information on the Walking Club and training classes.

Exercise your dog indoors. On bitter cold days, there are other ways you can exercise your dog indoors. You can use a treadmill to walk your dog; however, all dogs are not suited for the treadmill, so contact Our Companions if you need help with treadmill training. Indoor agility

training and obedience classes are available year-round and tire dogs out physically and mentally.

Create mental challenges for your dog. While dogs need physical exercise, they also need to exercise their brains. You can use clicker training (www.clickertraining.com), which is an animal training method that marks a pet's desirable behavior and rewards it. A mechanical device, called a "clicker," is employed to inform an animal that it's doing the right thing. Used with positive reinforcement, this is an effective approach to training an animal to perform desired actions. For example, you can encourage your dog to move a box with his nose. Each time he gets closer to the box you can use the clicker to mark the behavior, and then reward the dog with lots of treats once he actually moves the box.

Enjoy the snow with your dog. Activities such as snowshoeing, cross-country skiing or skijoring can be enjoyed with your dog. Skijoring involves attaching a harness to your dog while you ski. If you have children who like to sled, you can attach a harness to your dog and have him pull the kids on the sled. Another option is to create a maze in the snow for your dog. Using a snow blower or a shovel, clear a winding path for your dog and let him wander through the maze. This also stimulates your dog mentally as he determines how to get through the maze.

Have playdates with other dogs. If your dog is social with other dogs in the neighborhood, get the dogs together to run around and play, or try doggie daycare. Another option is hiring a dog walker to walk your dog while you're at work.

Use safety gear to protect your dog. Rock salt can harm a dog's feet, so you may want to consider dog booties to shield your dog from the effects of rock salt. Dog booties can be found at www.dogbooties.com. Lights or reflective gear, such as a dog collar, are also important when it's dark outside. Visit www.sitstay.com for reflective gear.

Please make sure your dog is in shape before engaging in outdoor activities. Check with your vet if you have any questions about your dog's health prior to exercising him outside.