

Swimming As Exercise

Swimming is terrific exercise for dogs. It eliminates the joint stress of weight-bearing activities like running, exercises the whole body, and can be continued into old age. Some breeds—Labrador Retrievers, Poodles, Newfoundlands—were bred for waterwork. The dog paddle is in their DNA. Others need to learn to swim.

Here are three steps to making your dog a hound for water:

1. Start slow. Expose your dog to water gradually and use praise and toys along the way. Begin in the shallow parts where only your dog's paws get wet. Play around there until your dog is confident enough to go into water to his knees, then his belly. This can take a few minutes or a few days. Go at your dog's pace. (Never drop a dog in water. It's a surefire way to make him fear it.)

2. Give him a hand. Once your dog is relaxed and confident in water up to his belly, begin the swimming lessons. Support his midsection and hindquarters, and move him slowly into deeper water. Immediately return him to where he can stand up if he starts to struggle. Eventually, after enough short trials, he'll start paddling. Praise and encourage him. Return to shallow water again and reward him with treats and more praise.

3. Set him free. When your dog is comfortable paddling, let him try it on his own. Encourage him to join you in deeper water with a favorite toy or treat. Clip a lightweight leash on him the first few times in case he gets disoriented and needs help redirecting toward the shore after his swim. (A harness is better than a collar when practicing swimming. It's easier and safer to grab if needed.)

Now you're ready for water sports, indoor and out. And remember: after dips in pools, the ocean, lakes, or ponds, rinse your dog in clean water and offer him fresh water to drink.