

# 5 Important Stretches for your dog

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*Did you know that stretching is as important as regular exercise? It's also the most neglected aspect of fitness for most of us. Knowing that, it won't come as a surprise then, that your canine partner can benefit just as much from stretching as we can, and just like us, it's often an overlooked aspect of their health.*



For many of our dogs, especially as they age, joint degeneration, muscle atrophy, loss of flexibility and the subsequent pain these cause, are all too common. Stretching allows a joint to move freely and helps slow its degeneration, while providing the added benefit of flexible muscles that are less likely to be injured. Reducing your dog's risk of injury will mean avoiding expensive visits to the vet, while improving his quality of life.



It's never too early to start stretching your dog. While puppies are naturally flexible, they aren't used to being handled especially on their feet. Luckily, puppies adapt quickly and as your dog grows, he will be comfortable and enjoy the process of stretching with you.



Don't worry though, if your dog is already a senior citizen, it's never too late to start. Whatever their age, dogs can maintain and even improve with just a few minutes of stretching each day. When it comes to mobility and pain management, consistency is more important than intensity.

Dogs love to play rough and going from zero to 100 can be stressful on their bodies.

With the help of AnnBeth's older dog, Baron, we'll show you 5 stretches that will help improve your dog's flexibility and help maintain his overall health.

*Photos Heidi Mobley*

## 1. Hip Extensions and Psoas (Illiopsoas) stretch:

Hip dysplasia and arthritis is very common as dogs age, so stretching into hip extension is important. If a dog has either of these conditions, they will often avoid fully extending their hips as they walk and will become very stiff. Keeping the hip flexible and moving is extremely beneficial and avoids aggravating an already existing condition. Even if your dog is young, keeping their hips flexible will help them avoid injury when running and playing.



### Hip Extensions

Start with your dog on his side. Place one hand under the dog's leg to support it, while your other hand is placed in front of the knee. Slowly guide the leg back, straightening the knee, stretching the leg back.

AnnBeth is using her leg to stabilize the dog while he's on the floor to prevent him from sliding back.

Go slowly and only until you meet resistance. Hold the stretch there for 15 - 30 seconds and release.

If possible, very gently bring the leg out slightly while in hip extension too stretch the Psoas muscle. This muscle is a deep hip stabilizer running from the spine down to the thigh and often injured in active dogs.



### Hip Extension

Note that the leg is almost parallel to the floor as it's stretched back for the hip extension.



### Psoas

As the hip is extended out the angle of the leg increases, stretching the Psoas. Only open the leg until you meet resistance. Your dog may be more reluctant to do this stretch which means it may be sore, so take it slowly.

Never pull the leg quickly or try to go too deeply into a stretch.

## 2. Hamstring Stretch

After the Psoas stretch, return the leg to a neutral position (parallel to the floor) Keeping the knee straight, stretch the leg forward without letting the dog's hips tuck under to avoid the stretch. Place your leg snugly against the dog's back to help stabilize your dog.



### Hamstring Stretch

Using your top hand, put slight pressure on the quadriceps to keep the knee from bending.

Slowly move the hock forward with your other hand.

Go slowly and only extend the leg forward until you meet resistance. Hold the stretch there for 15 - 30 seconds and release.

## 3. Shoulder/Triceps Stretch

Dogs carry more weight on the front limbs than the back. Because of this, the shoulders work very hard. Keeping them stretched will keep him comfortable and less at risk for injury.



### Shoulder Stretch

Place one hand in front of the dog's shoulder to support the stretch. With your other hand, slowly guide the dog's foreleg back stretching the front of the shoulder.



Again, take it slowly and stop when you meet resistance.

You may notice your dog really enjoys this stretch because it stretches and releases an over worked area of his body.



### Triceps Stretch

Place your hand behind the dog's elbow and slowly stretch forward towards his head.

After completing this series of stretches while your dog is lying on his side, roll him over and repeat the entire series on the other side of his body to maintain proper balance and mobility. Listen to your dog and don't go too far or too deeply into any of the stretches.

### 3. Sitting squarely

Sitting isn't just for obedience. Sitting squarely is very beneficial because it stretches the hips, knees, and ankles. (Also known as the hocks in dogs) By sitting, they do their own stretching and when they stand back up, it strengthens the leg like a squat exercise would for humans.





### Sitting squarely

Have your dog sit with both legs tucked under. If your dog tends to sit on one hip, you'll have to teach him to sit squarely. You can do this by standing behind your dog, and lure him into a sit between your legs. Keeping your legs close to his hips will force him to sit squarely.

As you can see, this position naturally stretches the Achilles, stifle and foot, creating a tight angle at the ankle.

## 4. Side Spine Stretch

This stretch is especially important as a dog ages because of the natural stiffening of the spine. It is important that the dog bend to each side in order to keep a healthy spine and avoid falling. If the dog can't lean to one side or the other when they get older, they often fall and can get hurt.



### Side Spine Stretch

Have your dog stand as you straddle him. Place your legs snugly (but not tight) against his sides. Using a treat as a lure, you will show him the treat and lead his head around and back behind you, causing the dog to stretch around your leg. Your legs will prevent him from swinging his hips out to turn.

Note that AnnBeth is holding the treat low enough to keep the dog's spine in a neutral position as she guides his head back.



### continued

Continue to lure the dog until he is stretched coming as close to a donut shape as the dog is able to.

Pay attention to your dog's limits. It is important not to push your dog too much. He will naturally stop reaching when he's met his limit. Reward him with the treat and repeat the exercise.

As with all of these exercises, repeat equally on each side.



As you can see, Baron is turning his trunk around AnnBeth's legs quite tightly. His hind end remains forward while his spine bends to the left. He manages to make a tight turn, but don't expect too much from your older dog if they've never done this before.

This stretch will be easier for younger dogs, but it's still important to do. Maintaining their spinal flexibility will keep them healthy in the long run. It's also a great stretch for dogs in athletic competitions that require quick changes of direction and flexibility.