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Chew On This: A Guide to Safe Chews for Your Dog or Puppy

Chewing is a natural and beneficial behavior for our canine companions. Whether it's teething puppies finding relief or adult dogs seeking stress release and stimulation, chewing plays a vital role in their lives. With so many products available, it's crucial to choose safe and suitable options for your dog or puppy. Here's what you need to know to ensure your dog's chewing habits are both enjoyable and safe.

The Importance of Chewing

Chewing offers numerous benefits for our canine companions:

- **Relieves Teething Discomfort:** Puppies, especially, need to chew to alleviate the discomfort of teething
- **Reduces Plaque Build-Up:** Regular chewing helps maintain oral hygiene by reducing plaque
- **Alleviates Stress and Anxiety:** Chewing can be a soothing activity for anxious or stressed dogs
- **Provides Mental Stimulation:** Engaging with a chew toy keeps your dog mentally active and entertained

Choosing the Right Chews – Here are some Ground Rules

All chews and chew toys can be a potential choke hazard and/or digestive risk. It is very important to consider what you are giving your dog or pup to chew as not all products are created equal.

To keep your dog or puppy safe, consider the following factors:

1. **Hardness:** A chew that is too hard can damage your dog's teeth. There are two simple tests you can perform to help assess how hard a chew is:
 - a. **Kneecap Tap** test - if it would hurt to tap your kneecap with it, it's too hard
 - b. **Thumbnail Press** - if you can't make an impression with your thumbnail, it's too hard
2. **Size:** Ensure the chew is appropriately sized for your dog. It should be large enough that it can't be swallowed whole. It should also be large enough that your canine companion has to open their jaws wide to chew on it. The narrower the angle of the jaw, the greater the force your puppy or dog can exert on the bone when chewing increasing the risk of broken teeth.

3. **Edibility:** Is the chew designed for “chewing” or is it edible? Things to consider with an edible treat:
 - a. Many healthy, single-ingredient edible chews are also quite high fat/high calorie. For example, bully sticks can be more than 80 calories an inch. If your dog or pup is consuming more calories and fat than their body needs in a day, they can end up with soft stool and an upset stomach!
 - b. A big enough piece of *anything* swallowed, no matter how digestible it is, can cause serious GI issues for your dog or puppy.
 - c. GO BIG!!! Purchase something larger sized and offer it over several timed chew sessions. There are also toys available that will "trap" the end of an edible chew so your dog cannot swallow it.
4. **Material:** Be mindful of the material and origin of the chew. Avoid items made from potentially harmful substances.

Ground Rules for Safe Chewing

1. **Monitor Chewing Time:** Give your dog or pup chews one at a time and only for a limited period. This way, you can monitor how much of an edible chew has been consumed and observe any potential digestive reactions. By giving out toys/chews rather than allowing your dog access all the time, they stay new and interesting (higher value) for much longer.
2. **Rotate Chews:** By rotating different types of chews, you keep the experience fresh and engaging for your pup, and you minimize the risk of them becoming overly skilled at one type of chew.
3. **Set a Timer:** Use a timer to limit chewing sessions. This prevents overconsumption of calories from edible chews and allows you to manage your dog's intake more effectively. *Any* edible chew ingested in large enough chunks can pose a digestive risk.
4. **Go Slow When Introducing New Edible Chews or Chews with Food:** Any new food has the potential of causing GI upset, especially when consumed quickly or in larger quantities.
5. **Think Calories:** All foods, even when used as treats, need to be included as a part of your pup's daily diet and not an addition, calorie wise. Chews and treats should only make up about **10%** of your dog's daily calorie intake.

Types of Chews to Consider

Safe Edible Chews:

- Bull Tail
- Bully Sticks
- Beef/Water Buffalo/Lamb Ears (Avoid Pig Ears)
- Beef or Buffalo cheek
- Collagen Chews
- Rawhide alternatives - Earth Animal No-Hide
- Dehydrated Chicken, Duck or Turkey Feet
- Dehydrated Fish Skin – Wolffish is especially long lasting
- Dental Chews – Indigenous Pet products Dental Bones, ProDen Plaque Off Dental Bones

Safe Non-Edible Chews:

- **Stuffable Rubber or TPR (Thermoplastic Rubber) Toys:** Brands like Kong, Sodapup, Planet Dog or WestPaw are a safe and healthy way to encourage chewing - you can use canned pumpkin, plain yoghurt, mashed banana, applesauce, natural peanut butter or canned food to stuff these toys, and freeze them for longer engagement. Just make sure that you are including whatever you are offering in your dog's daily calorie allotment. Some pet parents will use part of their dog's daily food stuffed into toys.
- **Coffee wood Chews:** sometimes called java wood or gorilla chews. These chews, unlike most other types of wood, do not splinter. Coffee wood softens a bit as a dog chews it but is still on the harder side, so may not be appropriate for all dogs or puppies. Make sure you are purchasing a piece that is appropriate relative to the size of your dog, monitoring chew time and inspecting it often.

Raw Bones:

Raw bones do not tend to be as punishingly hard as cooked or smoked bones, and do not splinter as easily. These treats need to be introduced slowly and close monitoring is a must!

There are two types of raw bones:

1. **Recreational** - larger, harder bones meant to be gnawed on or cleaned, but **not** consumed
2. **Meaty bones** - would include fully edible cartilaginous poultry bones - usually necks, wings and backs. These need to be of a size that your dog will chew and not swallow them whole.

Offer raw bones in an area that is easy to clean once your dog is finished chewing!

Homemade Chews:

You can also create safe, edible chews at home:

1. **Frozen Bell Peppers** - Stuff with your choice of filling and freeze
2. **Carrots** – Cook carrot in water or broth and freeze for a cool treat
3. **Frozen Cucumbers:** A refreshing and low-calorie option

Chews to Avoid

- **Tennis Balls** – the fuzzy coating acts like sandpaper and can damage tooth enamel
- **Nylon Bones** – often too hard and can cause broken teeth, can cause obstruction if swallowed
- **Cooked or Smoked Bones** - these bones are very dry and can “shard” easily, injuring your dog. High-fat bone marrow can cause GI upset.
- **Antlers** - just like cooked bone, antler can cause undue wear and breakage on a dog's teeth
- **Yak Cheese Chews** - although they seem like a healthy alternative, cheese chews are very hard and can damage a dog's teeth.
- **Pig Ears** - extremely high in fat, pig ears can cause major digestive distress for many dogs

Conclusion

Chewing is essential for your dog's physical and mental well-being, but safety is paramount. By selecting the right chews and adhering to safe chewing practices, like setting a timer on your phone, you can provide your dog with a satisfying and healthful chewing experience. Rotate different types of chews, monitor chewing sessions, and always be vigilant about the size and hardness of the chews you offer. Don't ever hesitate to dispose of a chew that has become small enough to pose a choking hazard.

Remember that each dog is an individual in their chewing preferences and vigour. What works well for one dog may not be safe for another dog or puppy even if they are similar in size.

With the right approach, you can ensure your dog enjoys their chewing time safely and happily.

It may take some time and practice, but in time you will be able to build a rotation of healthy chews to offer to your dog - **bone appetite!**