

### Ergonomics – How Physio Can Help You Help Your Dog

I was going to talk to you this month about how best to massage our furry friends – was, that is, until my husband rang to tell me our old neighbour was in hospital having spinal surgery after tripping over his dog! So please humour me while I talk about “ergonomics” which means using our bodies safely so we can help our furry friends as best as possible – I promise we will get to massage soon enough, but there’s really no point in talking about massage if your back is too sore to reach your dog to massage, is there?

There are a number of areas of dog care that put us at risk of injury. Obvious examples include lifting heavy or injured dogs in and out of cars; leaning over to bath dogs (especially the silly ones like my parents’ Lab – never a more water-phobic dog born than Holly!); competing at agility or other competitions without making sure we’re fit and supple enough; and not to mention merely getting from point A to point B with a wriggly pup around, as my poor neighbour found out. Whilst spinal surgery is indeed the most drastic injury I’ve heard of as a result of dog care gone wrong, I have heard complaints of numerous sprained ankles, sore muscles and sore backs and knees over the years, so I really think it’s time we take care of ourselves so we can take care of our dogs!

What exactly do I mean, though?

Take the example of dogs and cars. It can be really difficult, can’t it, to get a sick or large dog into or out of a car – the car is either too high or too low or too squashy or something else that makes things hard. If you can, consider a ramp or portable platform to help with higher cars. Your dog may need a towel around their tummy to help give you leverage to get them up or to help brake their enthusiastic exit. You may need to open both back passenger doors to slide the dog across rather than try to turn an injured dog to exit from the same door they entered. A thick plastic sliding sheet may help this manoeuvre, however it might also make the dog feel uncomfortable to travel on something slippery, so make sure the dog has good grip whilst the car is in motion – on occasion I’ve had debilitated patients travel on a sliding sheet (which doubles to catch bladder or bowel spills) with a blanket or beach towel over the top to provide some grip during the journey. The dog’s bodyweight holds the two layers in place during transit and we simply roll the edges of the two layers together and pull so that the dog comes along with the blanket and plastic when it’s time to relocate.

And whether it be getting in and out of cars or whatever the situation, when lifting or manoeuvring large or debilitated dogs, please make your motto “many hands makes light work”! It’s always easier said than done to find someone to help with a lift – it often takes longer and you may feel bad asking for help all the time, but trust me, it takes a heck of a lot longer to get a sore back to feel better and it is far more inconvenient to your friends, family and dogs to have you out of action with a back injury than it is to help you lift safely!

Did you know that when you hurt your back, the little muscles that normally support your spine (called the “multifidus”) switch off within two minutes of injury and waste away by half within two days?!! Can you imagine if your thigh muscles did that? If we went from looking like Arnold Schwarzenegger one day to Mr Puniverse two days later, we’d all be rushing off to the physio to get fixed, but because our multifidus can’t be seen (it’s a series of tiny muscles that run deep under the

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skin from one vertebra to the next) many of us try to tough it out, rest for a few days until the pain subsides, and then try to soldier on.

The problem with that plan, though, is that multifidus never works again properly unless we train it to do so. For example, physios researched two groups of people, one with a history of back pain and one group without and got them to raise their arm. No heavy weight lifting or anything like that – nice and simple – just lift your arm please. They found that the back pain people (even if they weren't sore on the day) switched on all their muscles in completely the wrong order to protect their spines compared to the people who'd never hurt their backs. This is why we manage to hurt our backs again and again doing comparatively simpler things (I hurt mine recently undoing my son's pyjama button and spent two days on crutches as a result!). We simply haven't trained up our spine supporting muscles properly and instead try to carry on with very uncoordinated, weak little muscles that are less and less able to do simple things.

And we're talking about muscles that aren't renowned for being hard workers in the first place. As we lead more sedentary lives, spending more time slouching in front of the computer like I am now, or driving long distances or slumping in front of the TV, we put these good supporting muscles at a "mechanical disadvantage" which means we expect them to work while we're stretching them all the wrong way, making them at risk of injury in the first place.

So! What can we do about this, I hear you ask. Well, of course the best plan is to seek individual advice so you can be assessed to make sure you've got the right exercises to practise and that you are indeed practising them the right way, but there are still a couple of easy things you can try, such as adopting mottos like "many hands make light work", "bend your knees not your back" (we can replace knees, after all, but not spines) and "brace when lifting". All qualified animal physios are also human physios, so please ask if you would like to make sure you're protecting your back properly.

But it's not just a matter of a strong spine when we're working with dogs, is it? When bathing dogs, we can brace all we like, but if we lean the wrong way for too long, we're putting those good muscles at a mechanical disadvantage again, so please take frequent rests if you can – for example, for those of us with multiple dogs, plan a short rest to stretch out the other way between dogs. And as obvious as it sounds, a good non-slip surface is not only essential for the dog – the last thing you need is to roll your ankle after slipping on a wet floor. If at all possible, try using a laundry tub or hydrobath to help bring the dog to the right height for you, rather than trying to twist and bend yourself into position. Even sitting on a plastic outdoor chair may prove better than leaning over for those of us forced to bath our dogs outdoors with the hose.

Our spine is not our only thing to consider when working with sporting dogs. I've lost count of the number of war wounds my agility handlers have reported! Keep in mind that other athletes don't compete without warming up and cooling down and you suddenly come to realise how important it is for both handler and dog to prepare for and recover from sport properly. Legs are the main cause of the complaints I have heard from agility people – please ask your dog's physio about how to stretch appropriately and how to reduce the risk of "delayed onset muscle soreness" (the feeling of muscles you never knew you had).

And then there's the issue of wiggly puppies! If you're like me, you've got a basket full of washing in one hand, a toddler on the other hip, and you're trying to negotiate a flight of stairs with a full-

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grown Rottweiler who is convinced she is the size and has the aerodynamics of a lap dog – recipe for disaster! As we grow older, we are at greater risk of falling at the best of times, let alone when in challenging circumstances like these. Balance skills need to be practised and it may be that you also need to stretch out your ankles after years of wearing high heels, for example – again, your physio can give you specific assessment and treatment if need be.

Of course, all the back strength, leg flexibility and balance skills in the world aren't going to protect you in every circumstance – there will always be a situation that you just can't predict, let alone the fact that dogs aren't robots that we can the every move of. However, the better prepared you are, the less chance you have of winding up in hospital like our dear neighbour did, and therefore the more chance you have of being able to help your dog live a long and happy life.

Lastly, if you do need to bring your dog to physio and you have a pre-existing ailment of your own, even if you aren't seeking treatment for it, please tell us so we can modify the homework exercises we give you to practise with your dog so we don't exacerbate your condition. There's nothing worse than getting down on the floor to massage your dog, only to find you can't get back up again!

Til next time, I wish you and your dogs the best of health,

*Helen Nicholson.*

