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**Questions for Canine Rehabilitation, Wellness, and Fitness Centers  
from Concerned Pet Owners**

As pet owners, we have become more aware of the need for appropriate and safe diet and exercise for ourselves and for our canine companions. Certainly there are informal recreational exercise opportunities, for example, walks down the block and Frisbee in the park, and more formal, organized events, such as recreational field trials, and agility and flyball competitions. There are even fitness centers for dogs, offering swimming, treadmill walking, and exercise, for fitness, wellness, or for rehabilitation following injury or surgery. The pet owner and handler, however, must be educated and aware of the service that is offered as well as the training of the staff involved in the care of the animal companion. The following is a list of questions that you might ask prior to enlisting the services of a fitness or rehabilitation facility for your dog.

**What services are available?**

Aquatic exercise or aquatic therapy is an option that might be offered by a rehabilitation center, fitness center, or kennel. Swimming in a pool allows for non-weight bearing exercise for range of motion, strengthening, and conditioning without joint stress. It can especially be appropriate for animals with arthritic conditions. Use of an underwater treadmill system is appropriate for gradually increasing weight bearing, especially for animals following orthopedic surgery. It is a great transitional activity to land-based exercise and allows for a focus on range of motion, strength, and endurance. Aquatic exercise might be performed at a fitness center in which you are responsible and liable for your own pet's actions. On the other hand, aquatic therapy might be performed in a rehabilitation center and should only be provided by a trained, skilled individual.

Manual therapy includes massage, joint mobilization, and other specialized techniques. The application of these techniques is certainly not without risk and should be performed only by a trained, skilled individual.

Physical modalities should only be utilized by a trained, skilled individual and can cause damage if used incorrectly. Therapeutic ultrasound provides a deep heating for pain relief and improved flexibility and extensibility of muscles, tendons, and ligaments. It also might stimulate healing processes. Electrical stimulation is used for a variety of reasons: to strengthen muscles, to relieve pain, and to reduce swelling. Cold or low level LASER might help to relieve pain and stimulate healing processes.

A variety of exercise equipment might be found at a rehabilitation or fitness center, including a treadmill which might be mechanical or electrical and possibly equipped with rails or harnesses for additional safety. It should have a varying speed, long belt length, and varying incline. Use of a treadmill should be supervised in order to protect the animal and to prevent injury. Special equipment might also be available which is used to enhance balance, strength, proprioception (sense of joint and body position), and range of motion.

### **Who performs rehabilitation or fitness training?**

Some fitness centers might allow you, the owner or handler, to use their equipment independently, while others might require supervision of staff members and even others will require that your dog only be handled by staff members and that you remain a safe distance away from any equipment. This might be for liability reasons or for the safety or comfort of your animal. Certainly your dog might be more motivated to exercise or swim with your encouragement, but some animals might become more anxious or distractible with you in the immediate area.

When considering a fitness or rehabilitation center for your dog, ask the staff members for their credentials, experience, certifications, and licensure, if applicable. In most states, treatment of animals must be under the supervision and direction of a veterinarian. Additionally, there are physical therapists and assistants, who, following extensive training, have completed the Canine Rehabilitation Institute or Northeast Seminars/University of Tennessee Certification Programs in Canine Rehabilitation. Additionally, the staff member might have a certain specialty or expertise in, for example, sports medicine, orthopedics, neurology, etc.

### **Who supervises the treatment?**

A veterinarian should, whether directly or indirectly, supervise all treatment of an animal. Even fitness centers, which are usually run by laypersons who are not licensed or certified by any board or university, should have some type of relationship with a local veterinarian.

### **Is a veterinarian referral necessary?**

A reputable facility will always ask for referral from your primary care veterinarian or specialist, including a statement of your animal's ability to physically withstand the rehabilitation or fitness activity prescribed.

If you are pursuing rehabilitation or fitness following your pet's surgery, consultation with your veterinary surgeon is essential. Consider the surgery to be an investment, not only a financial investment, but also an investment into the health and well-being of your pet. A reputable facility will not consider pursuing post-surgical rehabilitation with your pet, unless consultation has been made with the surgeon. Your pet's surgeon might have a specific protocol to be followed.

Certainly you should consult your veterinarian prior to beginning any exercise program for your pet. A seemingly normal animal without obvious problems, after a 10-minute swim, might have more obvious problems with limping, lameness, or injury following that swim.

If the facility requires a referral, more than likely, the staff will be reporting your pet's progress to your pet's veterinarian.

**Is a thorough evaluation necessary prior to beginning a rehabilitation or fitness program? Who will perform this evaluation?**

Take warning if the facility does not require an evaluation or a referral. Activities at this facility are at your own risk.

If the facility requires a veterinary evaluation prior to beginning treatment, you can be assured that there will be veterinary medical personnel familiar with your pet and his specific medical history and status.

A physical therapist specially trained in canine rehabilitation might evaluate and form a treatment plan with specific functional goals for your pet. This person is trained to identify neuromusculoskeletal signs which might or might not be expected for your pet following injury or surgery. If the therapist identifies anything that is unexpected or unusual, you should expect to be referred back to your pet's primary care veterinarian or surgeon.

**What consents or liability releases are necessary? Is the facility insured?**

**How is treatment progressed?**

Treatment will be progressed differently if the supervising staff member is medically trained or a layperson. Treatment might be progressed by visual assessment, heart rate, respiratory rate, body temperature, functional mobility, gait, or use of a limb. Progression, especially of post-surgical cases, might be based on expected tissue healing times, considering other factors as well. Obviously, a goal of fitness activities is not only to improve your pet's mental and physical well-being, but also to concurrently preserve the safety and health of your pet.

**Is the facility clean? Is there non-skid flooring?**

**What is the cost of treatment?**

Some facilities might offer a "package" leading to cost savings over time, and yet others will charge "a la carte" per treatment or per unit time. Will you be reimbursed if you attend fewer sessions if you paid for a "package"? Will your pet insurance reimburse you for this treatment? Check with your insurer prior to beginning treatment.

**Does the staff communicate with your dog's primary care veterinarian?  
With the surgeon?**

If your dog is receiving treatment as rehabilitation following surgery or for another medical condition, you should expect that the facility's staff communicate with your dog's primary care veterinarian (at the least). There might be treatment protocols which have been specified by your dog's veterinarian or veterinary surgeon. Certainly you should inquire as to the staff's experience with dogs with similar medical conditions as your dog.

Remember to ask if the facility requires vaccinations for your dog to receive treatment. You might be expected to show proof of vaccination or titer, especially for Bordatella.

**What activity is recommended prior to and after therapy? On days off? Is this person qualified to give you this advice?**

Your compliance with a home program is necessary for reaching your and your pet's functional goals. Progress and improvement will not occur with only one day of activity per week.

Question the facility's motivation if the recommendation is exercising at this facility every day. A day off (or of rest) is necessary to assess your pet's response to the new activity, whether swimming or manual therapy. Think "cross training"-- walk a day, swim a day, walk, swim, etc. And don't forget a hike in the woods on the weekend!

**Specific Questions Concerning a Swim Center...**

Swimming is becoming a popular activity for dogs and is recommended especially for dogs with arthritis or dysplasia, but also for conditioning and rehabilitation. Swimming in a controlled aquatic environment, such as an indoor or heated pool, offers buoyancy, resistance, and warmth. Prior to swimming, owners should trim their dogs' nails, brush and/or bathe their dog, and cease feeding for 1-2 hours prior to activity. Always offer plenty of water before and after exercise. Don't force your dog to swim! Swimming is not the best exercise if it "stresses out" your dog. Believe it or not, there are dogs who are not "meant" to swim.

**If swimming is an option, what emergency procedures or services are available?**

At a minimum, the swim center staff should be trained in Pet First Aid. An "on call" veterinarian should be available in case of an emergency. The facility should have a working relationship with a veterinarian or veterinary hospital which will respond or be available, even if the facility is open on weekends or evenings. If the rehabilitation facility is veterinarian-supervised or in a veterinary hospital, emergency equipment, medications, and trained staff should be available.

### **Do dogs and horses swim in the same pool?**

If this is the case, the pool's water temperature and cleanliness may be affected.

### **What is the normal operating temperature of the pool water?**

Is the pool indoors or outdoors? The water temperature should be at least 70 degrees and not over 90 degrees for aquatic exercise. Warmer temperatures are appropriate if the aquatic environment is used for its thermal effects. As the temperature increases, muscle relaxation and comfort increases, but duration of exercise activity should decrease.

### **What chemicals are used to treat the pool water? At what level or concentration? How often is the water chemistry checked? How often is the pool cleaned?**

Ionizing filters and salt-water are gaining popularity over chemically treated water (Chlorine or Bromine) in pools used for recreational or rehabilitative swimming for dogs. It is important, regardless of how the water is treated, to rinse and dry your dog following swimming, especially caring for your pet's eyes and ears.

### **Does the animal swim alone? With a life vest? With an assistant? With the owner?**

Some dogs might not swim with their hind limbs or with a full stride or range of motion when wearing a life vest while swimming. Some dogs might float, while others sink in water. Regardless, safety should be the priority!

### **How does your dog get into or out of the pool? Is there a hoist system? A ramp? Steps?**

Depending on your dog's level of functioning, steep steps or ramps might be difficult to negotiate. You should not be expected to lift your dog into or out of the pool, putting you at risk for injury.

### **What if my dog is lame after swimming?**

Delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS) is normal 24 to 48 hours post-exercise. Obvious abnormal lameness or limping should not be an expected outcome. Contact your veterinarian, veterinary surgeon AND the facility if this occurs.

### **Is the dog dried with towels or a drier? Do I have to bring my own towels? Is the dog rinsed or bathed before or after swimming?**

Certainly the growth and popularity of fitness, wellness, and rehabilitation facilities for animals ensure many options for pet owners concerned with the health of their pets. Research your options, call and interview the staff, visit the facility for a tour, and ask your primary care veterinarian and other pet owners for recommendations. Above all, consider your pet's health and safety; this will ensure your satisfaction with your decision.