

Let Them Eat: Meal Enrichment



Why and how you can spruce up your pet's daily meals!



What is enrichment?

At its simplest, enrichment is any activity that **enriches** your pup's world. The term comes from zoos: The same way ethical organizations provide animals with the chance to engage in natural behaviors, we can improve our domestic dogs' lives!



Respect your dog as...

- **A canine:** Think of deeply ingrained behaviors our pups' ancestors passed down to them, like chasing prey and scavenging for food.
- **A domestic dog:** We've selected different breeds to have specific traits. Many herding dogs have a strong desire to control the movements of those around them, for example, while retrievers love to carry things in their mouths. We've also bred many modern pups to have an even stronger drive to work for food!
- **An individual:** You know your pup best. Just like people, dogs are unique! Keep your companion's history in mind — but don't be afraid to adjust to what they tell you in the moment, too.

How enrichment fits into mealtime



Some dogs **prefer to work for food** than get it “for free.” This is called **contrafreeloading**. It means the same meal might be even more satisfying from a puzzle than a bowl.



Meal puzzles are valuable substitutes for activities your dog likes but can't do (like hunting real prey), can be great **supplements** to existing routines, and can even help **build your pup's confidence** over time!



Because we already feed our dogs once or twice every day, **food enrichment is one of the easiest entrance points** to make our pups' lives a little more exciting.



Just know that food enrichment activities are not a cure all. Stuffing a kong, filling a snuffle mat, or buying the next popular gadget won't be enough, on its own, to make up for a larger lack of fulfillment. **Balance various mental and physical enrichment activities** for the best results!

Mix up your pup's meals if...

- **You want an easy way to make their days a bit more fun.** Food enrichment is one of the simplest ways to start experimenting with enrichment activities. It can be a low effort, high reward chance to give your dog some extra stimulation — especially if you're short on time.
- **Your dog likes working for food.** Many pups enjoy the satisfaction that comes from accomplishing an attainable-yet-challenging task.



Mix up your pup's meals if...

- **You're low on chances to provide other forms of enrichment.** Sometimes we aren't able — thanks to environmental, schedule, or other constraints — to provide our pets with all the outdoor adventures of their dreams. Food enrichment won't replace these activities altogether, but it can help take the edge off.
- **You want to build their confidence.** With support from you, your pup can learn how to push through hesitation — and realize it's rewarding!



Give easier meals if...

- **Your dog has insecurity about food.** If your dog is new to your home or has a history of not getting enough to eat — maybe you rescued them from a difficult situation — be sure to provide plenty of “free” meals. This will help them understand that they’ll never go hungry again. Over time, you can progress to having them work for some food in fun, easy ways that gradually get more challenging.
- **Your pup can’t settle down on their own.** Mental enrichment is important for our pets. We should provide our dogs with lots of chances to use their brains! Too much of a good thing **can** create problems, though. If your pup can never sit still without some sort of puzzle or game? You might want to consider if your enrichment activities are overstimulating — and practice “doing nothing” on occasion.
- **Your dog isn’t eating enough.** Food enrichment usually encourages our dogs to be even **more** enthusiastic about mealtime, because now it’s only delicious — it’s also fun! On rare occasion, though, meal enrichment can get in the way of your pup’s nutrition if it’s too complex. Don’t be afraid to help your companion out.

Ways to make meals fun

Stuff your dog's kibble into a **snuffle mat**.

Don't have a snuffle mat or the time to DIY? **Toss your pup's food in the grass** for them to forage!

Break your dog's meal into a few smaller bowls or cups, and **hide them around the room for your pup to sniff out**. Offer lots of encouragement!

Play the "shell game" with your dog's food and some empty containers. Keep them on their toes.

Ways to make meals fun

Freeze your dog's food in a **classic Kong toy**.

Test out a few different **meal enrichment puzzle toys**. You can buy these or try DIY versions!

Soak your dog's kibble in broth — or get some wet food — and **spread their meal on a lick mat**. (You can also use a plain ol' cutting board!)

Add variety to your dog's meals. Combine kibble varieties or experiment with food toppers.

Find the sweet spot

You want meal enrichment to be stimulating — but not **too** challenging that your dog gets frustrated. If your dog finishes in two big bites? Chances are they didn't get much out of it. If they're still laboring over their breakfast puzzle an hour later, though? Odds are they're feeling frustrated and in need of a break.



Your dog is enjoying their enrichment if...

- **They're excited but not frantic:** Enrichment toys and puzzles should be about letting our pups safely engage in natural behaviors in our current environments — not hyping them up or making them feel like they're taking a test!
- **They can settle down after the puzzle or game is done:** In a perfect world, every enrichment toy or puzzle we give helps our dogs feel more relaxed after the fact. If that isn't the case? Something needs to change in our approach. Maybe we're doing too much of the same activity. Maybe it's too difficult. Maybe we're lacking fulfillment in other areas.

Test different activities

One of the best ways to make sure your food enrichment is effective is to let your dog tell you firsthand what toys, puzzles, and flavors they like best!

Try setting up a **simple “meal enrichment preference test”** to learn about your pup’s favorite things.

- Bring your dog into the room. Using a leash, a “sit” or “down” stay cue, or the help of another person, **position your pup a short distance away from an open patch of floor.**
- As your dog watches, **lay out a few different food puzzles one by one.** Maybe you have a version of a snuffle mat, a food-dispensing ball, a store-bought puzzle toy, and a DIY activity or two. **Add in a plain ol’ bowl** to give your pup the option to not work for their food at all, too.
- Try to **place your enrichment opportunities an equal distance from your dog.** If you only have three or four choices, you can probably fit them all in front of your dog.
- Once everything is set up, **release your dog!**
- **Take note of which activities your pup goes for first,** and repeat the test as many times as you want.

It's okay to take it easy

- **Meal enrichment doesn't have to be complicated.** Remember: You're trying to make your dog's life a little better... not win an award for your super-awesome-beautiful DIY enrichment setups. (But hey, if you're into that, we're cheering for you!)
- **Bowls are okay, too.** If you're running short on prep time — or aren't sure your dog **really** loves meal enrichment puzzles that much — there's nothing wrong with a classic bowl meal. You can always spruce it up by adding some pup-safe food toppers for more variety! (Fresh veggies are often a hit.)



TLDR: Frequently asked questions



Should I give my dog meal enrichment every day? It depends. Listen to your individual pup! Most dogs love daily enrichment if it's an appropriate difficulty level.



Will food enrichment keep my dog from relaxing? Providing our pets with outlets to express natural instincts doesn't automatically mean they won't be able to self regulate. Proper enrichment should help our pups settle down more than hype them up.



Will meal enrichment make my dog destructive? If your pup doesn't have an appropriate outlet for their instincts, they might turn to your belongings. But controlled enrichment opportunities can actually reduce problem behaviors!



How long should food enrichment take? While most dogs love a long-lasting chew or puzzle, effective enrichment should above all be about how satisfied your dog feels afterward. If they finish an activity quickly and have excess energy, consider increasing the difficulty. If your pup gets frustrated or gives up, simplify the task.

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