

How to Care for a Dog in a Cart/Wheelie

BACKGROUND

Occasionally, elderly dogs may become disabled, or younger dogs may suffer a debilitating injury, leaving them unable to use the hindlimbs (back legs). These pets are often still alert and normal in their behavior, and with proper care and a little extra help, they can continue to enjoy happy, healthy lives. Caring for pets that have paralyzed hindlimbs can be very rewarding when the pet is considered a member of the family, and the family has the time, financial resources, and housing arrangements that allow for the extra day-to-day measures needed by a dog that cannot use some of his or her legs.

Dogs may need to use a cart or wheelie to remain mobile for a variety of reasons. Some dogs may have acquired a serious disease such as hip dysplasia, degenerative myelopathy (DM), intervertebral disc disease, bone cancer, or arthritis. Dogs may have had a limb amputated as the result of injury or disease and the remaining limbs are not sufficiently healthy to support the dog. Depending on the severity of disease, carts can extend the dog's life by a number of years. Front, rear, and four-wheel carts are available for dogs, and this document will focus on the most common type, which is a two-wheeled cart for a dog that cannot use the hindlimbs. Regardless of type, a cart should always be fitted for each patient.

GETTING STARTED

Equipment needed:

- Proper-fitting cart
- Pet booties
- Baby wipes

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

- Pets in carts require extra care. You should check daily for any pressure sores that can develop at the contact points between your dog and the cart, and you will also need to allow the dog time out of the cart. Time out of the cart helps prevent pressure sores from forming. Pets should only be in the carts under supervised conditions.
- Some dogs that cannot use the hindlimbs because of spinal injuries may not be able to control the passage of stool (defecation) or urine (urinary retention or the other extreme, urinary incontinence). If this is the case, the amount of work involved is significantly more. You and your veterinarian should have an open and honest discussion about the time and effort required to care for a dog that can neither walk nor eliminate without assistance; in some cases, humane euthanasia might be the best choice for all involved.
- Pets may need to be trained to use the cart. Some dogs will adjust quickly to the carts, whereas others may require more time.
- The dog's living quarters should be analyzed, looking for any hazards the cart may become caught on, or that the cart may damage. Couches, chairs, or ornamental furniture may have to be adjusted to accommodate the pet and passage of the cart. Pools or ponds should be gated, preventing the dog from getting close to an unsupervised body of water at any time.
- You should remain aware of inclement weather conditions to prevent your dog from injuring himself/herself in snow, rain, or mud.

PROCEDURE

- Several companies have carts available to order. You should be cautious and look for a company that requires photos and measurements of your dog. *One cart does not fit all*, and each dog should be evaluated for the best-fitting cart. This will help prevent injury and sores in the future.
- Once the cart has been received, allow your dog to become comfortable with the cart in the home. Allow your dog to smell the cart and know that it is part of the household for at least a day or two before attempting to place him or her in the cart.
- The cart company should provide detailed instructions on the use of their cart. Read the instructions fully, and make adjustments to the cart as needed. Typically, these include adjusting the cart length, length of belt, and other fittings as needed.
- Once you have placed your dog in the cart, provide positive feedback. Offer treats as a training method, allowing your dog to *slowly* walk with the new device. Many dogs do not understand what the purpose of the cart is at first, and it may be helpful to have one person 10-20 feet (3-6 meters) ahead to offer treats while another person walks alongside, even with a leash connected to the dog's collar as during a normal walk.
- As a dog becomes more comfortable with the cart, he or she will usually increase speed and maneuvering with the cart. Ensure that furniture in the home has been moved if necessary, preventing the dog from getting "caught" on the corners. One particularly common snag is doorways, and you may have to help your dog adjust to them, as taking corners too sharply can catch the cart in the door frame. It is a simple matter to lift the cart and hind end of the dog in one move and reset it so the dog can then clear the door. Many dogs learn to adapt and take turns wider over time, but some never do.
- Traction is very important, because some dogs may have a hard time walking on smooth surfaces like wood or tile floors. This



Two-wheeled rear cart. Examples of carts for taller (top photo) and shorter dogs (bottom photo).

is especially true if two legs are completely paralyzed (requiring the cart) but the other two legs are also weakened or affected. Be sure to provide a surface that is flat but provides traction, especially when starting out. Pavement, a lawn where the soil is tamped and very smooth, and wall-to-wall carpet are good options; a throw-rug can also be good if it is long enough to allow several steps to be taken without the rug bunching up. Another option is simply to place pet boots on the paws of the legs the dog can use, to provide traction regardless of the texture of the floor; these should be removed when the pet is at rest so the feet can “breathe” and to avoid moisture accumulation.

- Ramps can be very helpful for clearing stairs into and out of a house.
- Allow your dog 5 to 10 minutes in the cart several times daily for the first couple of days. Gradually increase the time over the next month. Remember that new muscle groups will be used as your dog adjusts to the cart. A dog using a cart for the first

time may become sore and tired during the initial training period, but the increased mobility seems to outweigh this, and most dogs can learn to thrive with their carts.

AFTERWARDS

Some pets may also benefit from acupuncture, physical rehabilitation, and/or massage, especially if the injury was a sudden one and recovery is ongoing. Consult with your veterinarian to see if this is an option for your dog.

If pressure sores should develop, clean the area with a diluted, mild (veterinary-made, since human products can be profoundly irritating to dog skin) antibacterial soap and gauze. Call your veterinarian to determine if further treatment should be provided. Examine the cart and determine what has caused the pressure sore, and provide extra padding in the area to prevent further injury. Padding may have to be changed and/or cleaned frequently to prevent pressure sores from developing.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Can a cart make a dramatic difference in the life of my dog?

Absolutely. Dogs rely on a variety of smells and sounds to remain in touch with the world around them, and a cart allows them to do this. That said, dogs can be similar to people in terms of variety of personality, and some very outgoing dogs will be delighted to make the greatest use of a cart, whereas some quieter, easygoing dogs can be less enthused.

I am concerned that my pet will be immobile during the day when I am at work. Is it worth only having a few hours of time in the cart each night?

Many pet owners are concerned about their pet’s activity during the day. However, research has confirmed what many of us suspected all along, which is that most pets sleep during the day when their human family members are away. Therefore, a dog that cannot use his or her legs can still enjoy the interaction in the evening and on weekends when family members are home.

Will my pet be able to play with other pets while in the cart?

Yes, absolutely. The other dogs may be puzzled at first, but most get used to it. Most dogs play with the upper body and nose, and a cart allows this to happen.

Can I bathe my pet?

Yes. Simply remove the cart and bathe as normal. If your dog has urinary or fecal incontinence, you may need to bathe him or her more frequently than a mobile pet, for reasons of basic hygiene and to keep sores from forming if the haircoat has been soiled.

Can my dog urinate and defecate while in the cart?

Yes, depending on the severity of the disease, most will try to urinate and defecate; some spinal cord lesions may affect the bladder and/or the anus, and in such cases elimination may be more difficult or less difficult (incontinence). In many cases, using the cart may make it easier for a dog to relieve himself/herself than without!

How long should I leave my dog in the cart at one time?

This can depend on the dog. At first, 5 to 15 minutes is reasonable just for becoming accustomed to it. Once a dog has adjusted to it and understands how it moves, he or she can stay in it for longer periods of time. Some dogs may be able to rest in the cart, whereas others will need to be removed. A time limit of 2 hours is reasonable for a dog to be in the cart, and this can be adjusted based on the dog’s tolerance and display of enjoyment or fatigue.

Practice Stamp or Name & Address

Also available in Spanish.