

Keys to Canine Health

By Paul McNamara, DVM, DACVS,

[dek]*Preventive care can keep your canine healthy and extend his working life.*

You did it — you survived weeks of intensive canine academy training, passed your certification tests, and now you're ready to hit the streets as your agency's newest K-9 team. Soon you'll realize that you have a tremendous new responsibility: the health and welfare of your new partner. K-9 teams are a huge investment for an agency, which often expects years of continued service. Therefore, the handler's goal should be to keep his or her partner safe and healthy for as long as possible. Following are some suggestions for keeping your team functioning optimally into the future.

Physical Fitness and Nutrition

It's important to keep your partner physically fit. Many of the injuries and illnesses seen in law-enforcement canines are directly or indirectly related to a lack of physical conditioning. In many cases, orthopedic injuries such as strains and sprains can be prevented or reduced in severity if the canine is physically fit. Dogs that are overweight by even a few pounds put significant extra strain on their joints, heart, lungs, and other vital organs. Your canine should never be allowed to get overweight.

Canines need daily activity. Unlike pieces of equipment, canines cannot be put on the shelf and forgotten during long weekends or vacations. Putting your partner in your K-9 vehicle at the beginning of your shift and taking him out at the end does *not* constitute activity. During daily exercise sessions, you should critically evaluate your partner's overall physical condition. How does he look? Is he limping or showing other signs of physical stress? Although no nationally recognized standards for animal activity exist, it is generally accepted that a *minimum* of two to three episodes of activity lasting 15 to 30 minutes is needed *daily* to maintain muscle mass and tone and cardiovascular health.

Although there's much debate about which diet is best, there's little argument about the need for good nutrition. Feed your partner a diet that is appropriately balanced

for all the macro- and micronutrients; not just protein, fat, and carbohydrates. Along with a healthy diet, a growing body of evidence supports the use of joint supplements such as glucosamine and chondroitin sulfate to manage and possibly even prevent arthritis. Because arthritis is a leading cause of retirement for canines, I strongly recommend that working canines take a glucosamine/chondroitin supplement. Exercise caution when choosing those products: although the ingredient labels all look alike, many products do not have the scientific and safety data to support their use. Other supplements formulated specifically for active or older dogs may help your partner continue his duties. Contact your veterinarian or other expert when choosing such products.

Training and Environment

Work smart, train smarter. Although it is vital that a canine be able to perform all of the duties expected of him, over-training can lead to premature retirement. Constantly running an older dog through the agility field or making him jump out of the window of your SUV during training days may look intimidating, but it significantly increases his risk of injury. Although it may not look cool to assist your partner in and out of a vehicle, especially if it is an SUV, such assistance will significantly reduce the strain on his bones, joints, and muscles and may add months to a career.

Additionally, when on duty, stop occasionally to make sure that your partner is okay. It's important to ensure that he has a comfortable riding environment and fresh, clean drinking water. Canines should have access to water virtually 24 hours a day. If you cannot have a water source in the vehicle during patrol, it is your responsibility to stop periodically during your shift and offer your partner water. Likewise, if you are working or training for long periods of time, you must ensure that your partner is maintaining his hydration status by drinking enough water.

Housekeeping items — such as checking the interior of the kennel or crate for safety issues and making sure that all of your canine's gear is clean and intact — are equally important. I've observed a situation in which a flare became dislodged from its box and the spike part of it migrated into a K-9 kennel. If the canine had come into contact with the flare — for example, during a pursuit — he could have received a serious puncture wound.

Because puncture wounds, pressure sores, and similar skin injuries can be devastating for a team, attention should always be paid to the spaces in which the canine works. Check for sharp edges or protrusions and consider using non-slip seat covers and flooring. Conduct periodic evaluation of those areas to monitor them for wear and tear. For example, too-tight collars can cause skin or neck problems and dirty bite sleeves can cause excessive tooth wear or broken teeth. Even if not life threatening, those types of injuries can significantly affect a canine's ability to work and, over time, can shorten his working career significantly.

First Aid and Veterinary Care

Be trained in canine first aid for working dogs. Unfortunately, injury and illness are common in service dogs, and the list of potential problems is much larger than for a pet. You are your partner's best advocate, and you most likely will be the person to initially recognize and start treatment if your partner is hurt or sick. Therefore, maintaining your basic first-aid skills is critical to maintaining a canine team. First aid is a perishable skill that requires periodic refreshing, so taking a first-aid course every year or two is highly recommended. Such courses not only refresh your learned skills, they also expose you to new information, such as treatments for new explosives, weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), and so on.

A good working relationship with a veterinarian knowledgeable about working dogs is absolutely essential to a long working career for your partner. For example, if you bring your Belgian Malinois to your vet and he says, "That's a funny-looking German Shepherd," that veterinarian is *not* the right one for you. Working dogs are in a different category than pets, even if the breeds are the same, and should be treated accordingly. They are subject to different conditions and your veterinarian needs to know the difference.

Because preventive medicine is important in maintaining health, working dogs should be seen for a full physical exam at least every six months. This must be a hands-on exam — not done from the doorway — and must include a thorough examination of the mouth and teeth, especially if you have a patrol dog. In addition to the exam, your vet also may recommend blood work, X-rays, a fecal exam, urine testing, and so on,

depending on your partner's age and health status. Although those additional tests mean additional costs, they can be vital to maintaining a healthy canine.

Living Conditions

Good health care begins at home. It is your responsibility to keep your partner clean, well groomed, and healthy. Keeping a dog clean and groomed will reduce the likelihood of sores, wounds, and external parasites. Keeping his ears clean and the interior hair trimmed not only prevents painful ear infections, it also helps him maintain his hearing ability and thus do his job. And keeping a canine's nails trimmed helps his stability and traction when he is running. By having a good hands-on session with your partner, you can feel for hair knots or superficial cuts, assess him for external parasites such as ticks and fleas, and check your partner's body condition. You can learn a lot about your partner by petting and grooming him.

Because dogs are exposed to a host of parasites and diseases daily, many regions of the country use daily or monthly preventatives. Such products contain medications that prevent heartworm disease, fleas, internal parasites (such as roundworms and hookworms), ticks, and so on. Conditions such as heartworm and Lyme disease can be career-ending, if not fatal, and must be prevented. Conditions such as internal worms may not be fatal, but they can make a canine very sick, cause lost work time, and contribute to overall poor health that will result in premature retirement.

Get a Second Opinion

When in doubt about your canine's health or well being, ask someone. No one is perfect, no one has all the answers. If you are not sure about something, ask the members of your training group, your friends, or your veterinarian. One of the things that make canine handlers special is their love of their job and their relationships with their partners. You want to do as good a job as possible with your partner and to keep him healthy and safe for as long as possible. A tremendous amount of information is stored in former handlers' minds; don't be afraid to seek such information for your partner's benefit. After all, you know that your partner will *always* be there for you; don't you have an obligation to always be there for him, too?

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