

Gentle Game Cards

Games for older dogs — low on the joints, good for the head.

01

Snuffle mat or scatter feeding

NOSE GAMES (THE BEST OPTION)

A meal spread into fabric strips or across a rug. Zero joint load, full engagement. Use a mat or rug, never tile.

02

Raised find-it boxes

NOSE GAMES (THE BEST OPTION)

The same search game, but with the boxes on a low stool or step rather than the floor. This small change removes the repeated neck and elbow flexion of nose-to-floor searching, which matters a lot for a dog with neck or elbow arthritis. Almost nobody mentions this and it's the single best adaptation here.

03

Formal scent discrimination

NOSE GAMES (THE BEST OPTION)

One target odour on a cotton swab, hidden among several containers, short searches. Self-paced, genuinely absorbing, and completely unchanged by failing eyesight or hearing.

04

Flat lawn food trail

NOSE GAMES (THE BEST OPTION)

A short dragged trail across the grass with a jackpot at the end. Nose work plus a few metres of slow, deliberate walking.

05

Sniffari walk

NOSE GAMES (THE BEST OPTION)

A long line on a harness, and your dog chooses the route and the pace while you follow. This keeps the daily walk without the distance or speed. Trails and varied ground are better than pavement — just keep off gravel and anything slick.

06

Which hand

GAMES THEY CAN PLAY LYING DOWN

Treat in one fist, they nose the right one. Full engagement, no movement at all. The best option for a dog on crate rest or a very stiff day.

...9 more.

07

Three-cup shell game

GAMES THEY CAN PLAY LYING DOWN

Played on the floor in front of them while they stay lying down. Real cognitive work at zero physical cost.

08

Muffin-tin puzzle

GAMES THEY CAN PLAY LYING DOWN

On the floor or a low step. If arthritis limits how well they use their paws, use fewer balls so it stays solvable.

09

Graduated puzzle feeders

GAMES THEY CAN PLAY LYING DOWN

A rotating set of two or three commercial puzzles. One caution that matters: if your dog has cognitive decline, step the difficulty down. A puzzle a confused dog can't solve produces frustration, not enrichment.

Watch: step the difficulty down

10

Nose-touch targeting

GAMES THEY CAN PLAY LYING DOWN

They touch your hand or a target stick on cue. Low-impact, gives a sore dog a way to earn rewards without moving much, and later becomes a steering tool if their sight fades.

11

Chin rest and cooperative care

GAMES THEY CAN PLAY LYING DOWN

Teaching them to rest their chin in your palm and hold still for handling, nail trims and eye drops. This gets more valuable every year as medication and vet visits increase — it turns handling from something done to them into something they participate in.

12

Ground-level cavaletti

GENTLE MOVING GAMES

Broom handles laid flat on the grass, walked slowly. Encourages deliberate limb placement, which degrades with age. For seniors, flat on the ground — no height at all.

...3 more.

13

Cookie stretches and sit-to-stands

GENTLE MOVING GAMES

Luring the head slowly toward each hip and to the chest, and controlled sit-to-stand repetitions. These are real therapeutic exercises with some evidence for improving range of motion.

14

Swimming or underwater treadmill

GENTLE MOVING GAMES

The one way to load muscle hard with almost no joint impact, and the canine arthritis exercise finding with an actual measured outcome behind it. Vet clearance first, buoyancy aid, and watch for fatigue – it arrives suddenly in older dogs. Flat-faced and short-legged dogs are poor swimmers.

15

Novelty outings

GENTLE MOVING GAMES

A café sit, a wander round a garden centre, a short drive somewhere new and quiet. Store and café outings are on the recommended list for arthritic dogs, and new sights and smells are enrichment that costs the joints nothing. Often the best value-per-effort on this page.

your own

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