

Backpacking with Your Dog

Dog backpacks are a great way to exercise your dog in the city. They allow you to put extra weight on your dog's back (use water bottles or food cans) to give your dog a heavier workout on or off the leash. I especially like to recommend them for people who can't let their dog off the leash, or for people who have to skimp a bit on the walkies that day. Backpacks add resistance, which tires your dog out faster.



Purchase

You can purchase a backpack at [Tisol Pet Food Stores](#) (about \$50 made by Outward Hound) and they should fit smaller than you think. The dog on the left, my Portuguese water dog, Toonie, is wearing an extra small Outward Hound "Quick Release" backpack. The dog on the right, Vegas, is wearing a pack made by Ruff Wear. It's an extra small too. I found the next sizes up were hitting my dog's elbows and were causing them to be uncomfortable. These extra small ones ride high on their backs so they don't knock their legs while they are running.

Training

Teaching your dog to wear a backpack is easy. I would begin by letting my dog sniff the item and feeding them cookies. Then gently raise the backpack and stroke your dog's shoulder with it. Feed him a cookie. Stroke the back. Cookie. Place the pack on. Cookie. Stop and praise! Then clip the back pack on all at once and try getting your dog to walk around in it. Take him for a walk the same day with it on.

Teach Your Dog to be a Backpacking Star.

First, you need to teach your dog (and yourself) to power walk. This is a tight leash working walk where you don't let your dog move around your body or smell things along the side (if he has to go to the bathroom, by all means, stop and let him! But don't let him meander around after he has toileted. Use this to focus your dog and tire them out. For more information on power walking, check out Sarah's blog at www.rocketdog.ca.

Also, a “wait” (or stay) while zipping things in and out of the pack is needed. To teach this, practice leaning over and zipping the pack open and closed. Don’t ask your dog to sit, as this makes the pack further away from you and the contents shift so they are harder to get out. You ideally want your dog to wait in a stand position.

Your dog may try to skirt out away because you are leaning over them (in a very strange way) and making strange noises with the zippers. Some dogs aren’t nervous, they just want to turn and face you to look for more treats! In either case, ask your dog to wait and jiggle the zippers. If your dog waits without moving, even for a second, stand up straight (releasing the pressure of your face in their body space) and praise them for staying. Importantly release them to move around again with an OKAY command. Try it for longer periods as the dog gains more confidence with this new style of wait.

I also like to teach my dog to jump up on things so that they are at a convenient height for loading and unloading. Use a bench or a piece of concrete and lure your dog up with a treat. Praise and reward for success and then add a jumping word like “jump” or “up” so the dog knows what you mean each time.



Backpacks take very little training for a huge benefit in exercise (and fun!). We think you will notice a change in your dog’s behaviour and energy level immediately. And, a tired dog is a good dog!

