

H.O.P.E. POST SPAY/NEUTER ACTIVITIES

After a spay or neuter, your furry friend will still have full puppy energy but suddenly need restricted movement. The energy still needs to get released, just without sprinting or jumping. Mental work and enrichment are your best friends here. Post surgery recovery isn't about suppressing energy. It's about redirecting it. You may have been given sedatives to help manage your pups energy levels during this time, even with the medication, you should still provide mental enrichment.

Below are five safe, low-cost ways to burn energy while protecting healing incisions:

1 . Licking

Why it works:

Licking is one of the most calming behaviors for dogs. It lowers heart rate and stress levels, making it ideal during recovery periods when physical exercise is restricted.

How to engage properly:

- Spread soft foods in a thin, even layer across a lick mat, kong, tile floor, or cardboard box. Thick clumps can also stimulate their mind. Safe, inexpensive options include plain yogurt, canned pumpkin, mashed banana, unsweetened applesauce, or soaked and mashed kibble.
- Freezing the food extends engagement time and increases the calming effect. Place the mat on a stable surface or use it inside a crate to prevent scooting. Lick mats are especially helpful during high energy times such as evenings or during required crate rest.

What to use:

- Lick mat (store bought silicone mat)
- Kong (or something similar)
- Plain yogurt
- Canned pumpkin (100 percent pumpkin, not pie mix)
- Unsweetened applesauce
- Mashed banana
- Soaked and mashed kibble

2. Chewing/Shredding

Why it works:

Chewing is a natural stress reliever for puppies. It engages jaw muscles, satisfies oral needs, and releases calming hormones without requiring a ton of body movement. After surgery, this gives puppies an outlet for frustration while protecting healing incisions.

How to engage properly:

- Choose chew toys that are firm but slightly flexible. If you can press your fingernail into the toy, it is usually an appropriate firmness for a puppy. Avoid extremely hard items that could damage or break teeth, like antlers.
- Rotate chew toys every one to two days so they stay novel and interesting. Supervise chewing sessions to ensure your puppy remains calm and does not ingest any hazardous objects.

What to use:

- Rubber chew toys (Kong style)
- Bones designed for puppies
- Thick rope toys (supervised only)
- Frozen, damp washcloths for teething puppies
- Frozen carrot
- Cabbage

3. Obedience Training

Why it works:

Mental effort is exhausting for puppies! Short training sessions allow them to burn energy through thinking and problem solving rather than movement, which protects surgical sites while still providing stimulation.

How to engage properly:

- Keep sessions short, ideally 5 to 10 minutes, and repeat two to four times per day. Focus on low-movement behaviors such as sit, down, touch, watch me, place, crate, etc.

What to use:

- Soft, pea sized treats or regular kibble
- A quiet indoor space
- Optional clicker or verbal marker
- Patience

4. Sniffing

Why it works:

Sniffing engages a dog's strongest sense and provides intense mental stimulation. Nose work burns energy efficiently while keeping the body calm and controlled.

How to engage properly:

- You can use everyday household items such as towels, cardboard boxes, paper towel tubes, muffin tins, or purchase items like a snuffle mat.
- Scatter your pups food! You can toss it in the grass, snow, a towel, your rug, or just the hard floor. The larger and more spread out of a scatter, the more mental work it is to find them all!
- To increase difficulty you can wrap up and knot a towel, cover boxes, purchase treat dispensing games.

What to use:

- Bath towels or hand towels
- Cardboard boxes
- Paper towel or toilet paper tubes
- Muffin tin
- Treat dispensing balls
- Snuffle mat (store bought or DIY)
- Puppy's regular kibble or soft treats (avoid lots of treats to prevent weight gain)

5. Settling

Why it works:

It's important to teach puppies how to intentionally relax, which is essential during recovery and beneficial long term. Part of raising a dog is teaching them how to regulate their emotions and how to step away and settle.

How to engage properly:

- Introduce a bed, towel, or mat and reward your puppy for choosing to be on it. Mark and reward relaxed behaviors such as lying down, shifting hips, or resting their head.
- Reward with food or praise slowly and calmly between their paws to reinforce stillness. Gradually increase the time between rewards as your puppy remains settled. If they get up, simply reset without correction.
- Practice settling during real life activities like meals, watching TV, or working. This helps your puppy generalize calm behavior rather than viewing it as a trick. It's best to work on this after giving your pup some mental stimulation and they are tired. If needed, try one of the first four activities before this one.

What to use:

- Dog bed, towel, or mat
- Soft, low value treats or kibble
- A calm, low distraction environment
- Optional background noise (white noise or soft music)