

Post-op TLC



FIGURE 1

A front leg bandage in place with a comfortable and content patient.

Home care

James Grierson provides pointers for owners on canine care after orthopaedic surgery.

Having your dog go through a major operation is always a concern, but once he is back home then the real hard work begins! The care that dogs are given following surgery is a crucial aspect of their recovery and can make or break the success of a particular surgery. What care he should receive will depend on the surgery that he's undergone and the preferences of your vet, so always check with them about what they want.

I always take the time to discuss post-operative management with an owner, as well as giving them a chance to ask questions and raise concerns before providing detailed written instructions.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Remember that your dog will be in pain following an operation; this means that his behaviour may be different. He may not want to be stroked or fussed as much as normal. Pay particular attention to young children around your

dog following surgery as he may have a tendency to snap if he feels threatened or worried that he may be hurt, even if only by accident.

When your dog is resting after surgery he will need fewer calories as he won't be doing the usual level of exercise that he's used to. As a general rule I recommend cutting calorie intake by 25-33 per cent to avoid any unnecessary weight gain during recovery. The heavier your dog, the more strain and stress is put on his legs – and this is of particular concern when he's recovering from orthopaedic surgery.

WOUND CARE

If your dog has had an operation then he will have a wound. It is vital that this is looked after properly to reduce the risk of him developing an infection.

There may be sutures or staples holding the wound together. It is essential that your dog does not lick his wound since a dog's mouth is full of

bacteria and licking a wound will not keep the wound clean; it will actually do the opposite and is a common reason for dogs having wound infections or wounds falling apart early in the healing process. Using a bandage, dressing or Buster

Action stations!

Warning signs that might indicate that there is a problem with a wound include:

- Blood or fluid staining through a dressing on the leg (sometimes called strike through).
- If the wound edges look red or swollen.
- If there is fluid or pus oozing from the wound or around it.
- If the wound has opened up or the sutures/staples look like they are coming out.

If you see any of these signs then take your dog to your vet to have them look at it.

collar (Elizabethan collar) can help prevent your dog from getting at the wound.

After surgery it typically takes 24-48 hours for the wound to seal up. During this time a light dressing (Figure 2) is applied and only changed if it becomes wet or falls off too early. After 48 hours this dressing can be removed and discarded. As long as the wound is looking clean and dry then you do not need to worry (Figure 3).

MOBILITY

Following any orthopaedic surgery, what you allow your dog to do is critically important. Orthopaedic procedures often use metal implants to support bones when they are healing (Figure 4), and while these are strong they are not indestructible!

Unfortunately, every year, I have to perform repeat surgeries on animals that have jumped or run before their leg has healed fully (Figure 5). Not only does this add further expense for the owner, but it puts their dog



FIGURE 2
A superficial dressing covering a surgical wound.

through yet another operation and that means recovery time starts all over again.

It is, therefore, vital that any instructions given to you by your vet are followed to the letter.

Some dogs may struggle to walk after surgery and need

some help to get in and out of the garden to toilet. Using a rolled-up towel as a sling either under the tummy (for back leg problems), or around the chest (for front leg problems), can help support some of your pet's weight when they are moving. This is something you can probably manage to do on your own with a small dog, but if you own a larger dog – like a Great Dane or a Mastiff – then it will take two people to do this safely.

This is something that you will need to consider when you get home with your dog, as well as thinking about how you are going to get him out of the car without him jumping down!

REST & RECUPERATION

Typical questions I am asked by owners after their dogs have had surgery are "How long will I have to rest my dog after his op?" and "When can I let him off the lead again?"

There is always going to be some variation in what you can do and at what time

depending on the type of surgery, so it is not possible to give an answer here that covers every procedure. However, as a general rule, I would expect most animals to be controlled for 12 weeks (three months) before they can be let off the lead again.

Not all dogs need to be caged in the recovery period but the use of travel crates helps to make things easier, and take some of the stress out of wondering what your dog is up to when you are not in the house.

SIX-WEEK SCHEDULE

The first six weeks of the recuperation time is often the most critical and an example set of instructions might be:

First four weeks: restrict your dog to slow five-minute walks on a lead, two to three times daily.

From week five onwards: slow 10-minute walks on a lead, two to three times daily.

● Until advised otherwise, your dog must only be allowed in the garden for toilet purposes on a short lead.

● Ensure your dog is not allowed to play with other dogs, run around the house, go up/down stairs or jump on/off furniture during this time. Active dogs are best confined to a kennel or single room of the house.

● Avoid slippery floors – wood laminate can be particularly difficult for dogs.

● Your dog should bear weight on the affected limb within a few days of surgery; contact your vet if your dog is still hopping on the leg five days after surgery.

● You should notice a gradual but steady improvement in how your dog uses the leg; if at any stage there is any deterioration in how your dog uses the leg, or you have concerns regarding the wound, call your vet.

SIX-WEEK CHECK-UP

In most cases I will be seeing dogs six weeks after surgery to assess how they are doing and take X-rays to look at how a fracture might be healing. The plan from here will depend on what is happening with any particular animal but a typical plan would be as follows:

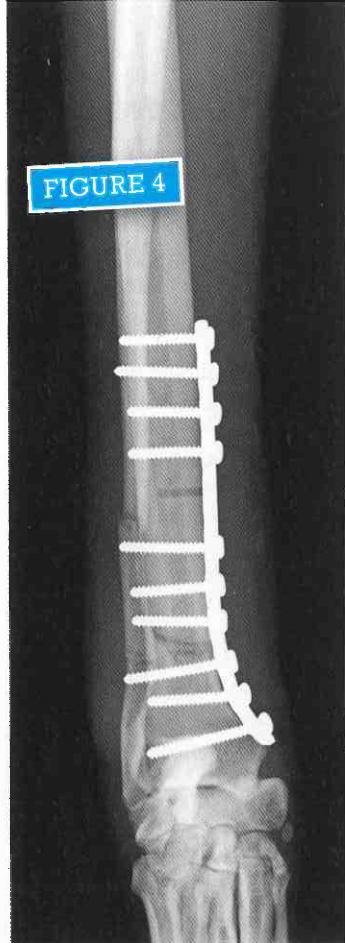


FIGURE 4
Above: A broken leg following repair with a plate and screws.

Below: The same leg as in the X-ray above after the dog jumped off a sofa, leading to the plate bending and failure of the repair. This dog needed further surgery to correct this.



FIGURE 3
A clean and dry surgical wound four days after surgery.

Health & welfare

● Start to lengthen lead exercise: make each walk five minutes longer each week, for example 15 minutes twice daily next week, and 20 minutes twice daily the week after and so on.

● Your dog should not have any off-lead exercise for at least another six weeks and should continue to be kept away from stairs, off slippery surfaces and furniture and so forth.

● Hydrotherapy can be started.

● After six weeks (ie the 12th week after surgery), if your dog continues to progress well, you can start to allow five minutes of off-lead exercise at the end of the lead walks. Lengthen these periods by five minutes each week.

● You should notice a continual and steady improvement in how your dog uses the leg; if, at any stage, there is any deterioration in how he uses it then contact your vet.

PHYSIOTHERAPY

Post-operative physiotherapy plays a vital role in the healing, pain relief and rehabilitation after injury, illness, disease or surgery. Assessment and treatment plans are best performed by a qualified veterinary physiotherapist working in conjunction with the veterinary surgeon who operated on your dog.

(Continued on page 46)

Swollen toes at the end of a bandage; note the swelling of the toes around the nails.

FIGURE 6



True-life tale

Coping with

Looking after a dog needing weeks of recuperation after surgery is not for the faint-hearted, as reader **Lynne Garner** explains.



Tasha after her first knee operation.

I think the only time I planned for the worst-case scenario with my dog, Tasha, a Belgian Shepherd X Doberman, was when I researched pet insurance. From that point onwards I hoped she would never become ill or injured. However that changed when she was hit by a car.

Over the next 18 months Tasha underwent five operations, two of which involved plates and bolts being fitted in her stifles (knee; in her hindlegs). This meant an active dog that enjoyed a minimum of two daily 40-minute walks was reduced to no walks for weeks at a time.

HOME ADJUSTMENTS

By day four of her recuperation at home Tasha didn't understand why she couldn't jump on her

favourite piece of furniture to look out of the window, or why she couldn't go for long walks and play our normal rough and tumble games. It was extremely important to keep her as quiet as possible, so keeping her calm and her brain active became one of our main priorities.

We rearranged the house and removed her window seat so she could no longer jump on it. Then we adapted her favourite game of tug of war, discovering that if she lay down we could still play but she didn't put pressure on her healing knees.

We also found that having a few sessions of acupuncture not only appeared to help the healing process, but afterwards she was extremely calm and would sleep for hours.

Food also became an important part of keeping her amused. Obviously she wasn't burning off the additional calories by exercise, so we had to become creative. We discovered Tasha liked peeled and chopped carrots, so we would get her to lie down and roll a piece of carrot to her. She could catch it and then enjoy a low-calorie treat.

I also obtained a few doggy treat recipes. Not every recipe I baked was successful, but I did find a few she enjoyed and that didn't add too much to her waistline.

VET SUPPORT

From the outset our vets were supportive and willing to answer questions. We were shown X-rays and when one of the plates had to be removed it was given to us with an explanation about the job it had done. They even supplied a list of websites that sold toys created to keep canine minds active. We soon learned not to be scared to ask questions.

We were told to expect the convalescence period to last around eight weeks after each knee operation. Although it felt much longer, this prediction was correct. While the stitches were in place we were advised not to leave Tasha alone. So we had to plan everything from the obvious day-to-day activities,

Tasha once the bandages had been removed after her first operation.

A close-up of the staples in Tasha's leg.



convalescence

such as going to work, to the odd times when you think 'I'll just pop out' to ensure someone was always at home with her.

Thankfully we have many friends and family nearby who were willing to dog-sit for us. We drew up a rota of dog-sitters at the end of each week for the following week. As we were calling in favours, we tried to keep to times when we really needed to go out. This meant we decided not to waste those favours on trips to the cinema or meals out and so on, which meant we had no social life. This, we soon discovered, added to our stress levels as we weren't getting a break.

STRESSING OUT

Stress for me and my partner came from two directions. First, vet bills were mounting up – and I'm talking thousands rather than hundreds of pounds! Thankfully, this is where the couple of days spent researching pet insurance finally paid off. After a long conversation with the insurance company I was relieved to learn that we were covered for Tasha's treatment and we only had to pay the excess. This greatly reduced our money worries.

The other direction stress

came from was from having to learn how to inject, give tablets and change bandages on a daily basis to an unwilling patient, so we quickly initiated the 'three biscuit trick'. Basically, if the bandage had to be changed everything was shown to Tasha first. She then received a biscuit. The old bandage was removed; she was given a biscuit. The new bandage went on; she received a biscuit.

Within days Tasha learned

that if she cooperated she would receive three biscuits, making the process a little easier for all concerned. It's a trick we still use today.

LESSONS LEARNED

To help manage our stress levels, I visited the local health food shop and had a chat with the assistant. She suggested herbal remedies such as Kalms, St John's Wort and Bach flower remedies, and we found using a candle burner with lavender at night helped us sleep.

Oats, I learned, are believed to help mood, so oatcake, porridge and other oat-based food items were added to our diet. I don't know if all or any of these were mind-over-matter but they appeared to help.

We also realised the long walks we were used to enjoying with Tasha prior to her accident had been helping us deal with normal daily stress levels. Having lost these, we decided to increase our trips to the gym. I joined classes and found that not only the exercise, but also talking to other members of the gym, helped reduce stress.

Today Tasha is fit and

Tasha all bandaged up after the operation on her other hindleg.



Full of beans, Tasha's back to playing football in the park!

A fully recovered Tasha enjoying a rough and tumble with her best friend Baxter.



enjoying life to the full again, although when I look back I wonder how we coped. I think learning new tricks and adapting our lifestyle helped, and they still do. ●

About the author



Lynne Garner has been a freelance writer since 1997 and has had 21 books and over 200 features

published. She has always shared her life with dogs and surrounded herself with like-minded people.

Q&As



A Labrador with an external skeletal fixator (ESF) attached to his right front leg. Note that there is no excessive discharge from where the pins enter the skin.

It is unusual not to recommend physiotherapy following surgery and so it is worth discussing this with your dog's surgeon at the time of discharge.

AND FINALLY...

The most important aspects of post-operative care are to listen carefully to the instructions from your vet, follow them and use your common sense.

You know your dog much better than your vet, who will have only seen him for a relatively short period of time, so if you are not happy with the way things are progressing, or you are worried about your dog, then talk to your vet. It is much better to be told that you are worrying about nothing than to miss something that may have more important consequences. ●

About the author



James Grierson
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orthopaedic surgery.

Q My dog has a metal frame and pins sticking into the bone – what do I need to do?

A Pins sticking into the leg are often used in fracture repair and are called external skeletal fixators (ESF; Figure 7). They hold the bone still while it is healing and are then removed once they have done their job.

It is important to check the pins daily. Normally within three to five days of surgery a dry scab should form where each pin enters the skin. If there is persistent discharge from these wounds then you need to let your vet know, as it could indicate an infection or loose pin.

You will also need to check that there is no swelling – there should be a gap between the skin and the clamps and the connecting bar.

It is important that you do not allow your dog to chew the ESF frame or lick at the wounds.

Q My dog has a big bandage on his leg – what do I need to do?

A Bandages are often used for additional support (Figure 1, p42) and the vast majority do not cause any problem at all, but a poorly maintained bandage can cause complications. These can be mild, such as a slight sore, or may be more serious, such as full-thickness skin wounds.

It is important to follow these simple instructions to ensure that your dog's bandage does not cause a problem:

- The bandage should always be kept clean, dry and intact.
- A plastic bag should be taped over the foot when going outside, but should not be left on or the foot will become sweaty.
- If the toes are visible

check them twice a day to look for signs of swelling (Figure 6, p44).

You should also check for:

- If the bandage is wet.
- If the bandage has slipped or twisted in any way.
- If there is any sign of discharge seeping through the bandage or it smells bad.
- If your pet stops putting weight on the foot or seems distressed by the bandage in any way.
- Most dogs should be walking on a bandaged leg. If your dog has been walking happily and then starts to hop or become lame then it suggests a problem with the bandage.
- Dogs will also start to chew a bandage if the leg is painful underneath so do not automatically assume they are being naughty.

If any of the above are apparent, then take your pet back to the vet straight away to be checked.

Q How do I know if my dog is in pain or suffering?

A It is always a worry that your dog may be in pain. Animals that have orthopaedic surgery are always sent home with painkillers to help them through the recovery period. These are not going to take away all the discomfort associated with surgery, but they do help.

If you are worried that your dog is not comfortable then contact the vet who performed the surgery and talk to them. In some cases additional drugs can be prescribed to help, or it may be that there is a problem that needs addressing.

Signs that your dog may be in pain or distress include:

- Restlessness – particularly difficulty in settling

Holding a leg completely off the floor could be the sign of an injury.

into a comfortable sleeping position.

- Holding the leg completely off the floor.
- Loss of appetite.
- Excessive chewing at a wound or bandage.
- Whimpering when walking.
- Uncharacteristic signs of aggression.

Q Do I need to take time off work to look after my dog, or need to sleep downstairs with my dog to watch him?

A As a general rule the answer is no. I wouldn't send a dog home after surgery if he needed 24-hour monitoring and care. Some owners prefer to be with their dogs during the days following a major surgery so that they can better tend to any needs they may have, and I will often schedule some routine surgeries around an owner's need for time off.

Some dog owners do choose to sleep next to their dogs following surgery, but this is a personal choice and not a necessity. ●

