

Your Guide to

8 Ways to Prevent Injuries in Agility Dogs

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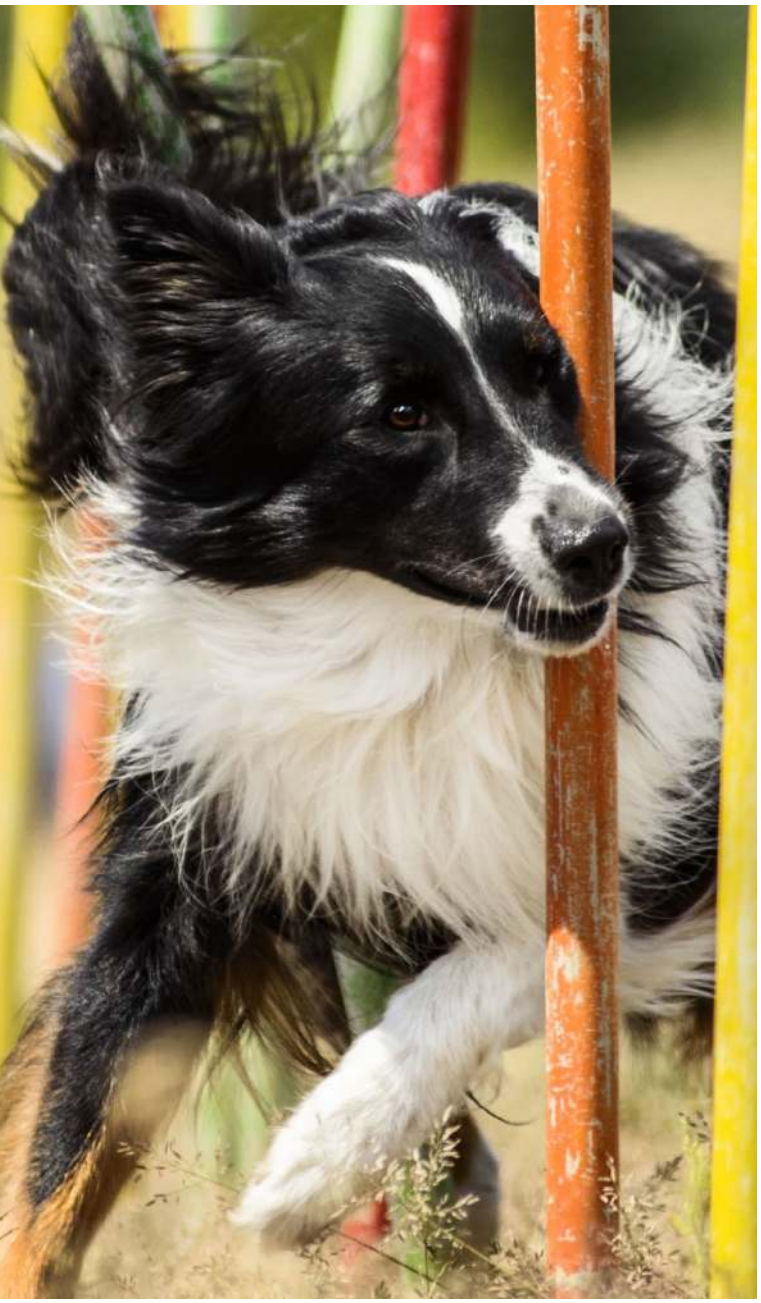
Sports injuries are common in human as well as in canine athletes. An interesting study looked at the injuries in 3 801 agility dogs. I found a few of these stats to be significant and have shared them below:

Your dog is more likely to get injured if:

- you, the handler, have less than five years of experience
- your dog has been doing agility work for less than four years
- your dog is a border collie



Border collies were over represented for injuries, but this could be due to two things: Firstly, it is the commonest breed of dog for agility work, and secondly, it may be due to the breed's temperament; border collies have an attitude of, "Gotta keep going, never gonna stop".

It goes without saying that the more experienced the handler, the less likely the handler or the dog will get injured. Experienced handlers know when their dog has done too much, and they are less likely to make mis takes that could result in their dog making contact with agility obstacles.

Dogs that have been doing agility for many years are also more likely to be properly conditioned.

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Muscle weakness, unstable joints

A typical agility course requires a dog to climb, jump, balance, stop and start abruptly, do quick, sharp turns, weave, descend and run. I cannot think of a human sport that requires one to do all of that.

In the study, the shoulder, back, neck and toes were the most common areas for injuries. Soft tissue injuries were common and were frequently associated with interactions at the bar jump, A-frame and dog-walk obstacles.

Whether you are a human athlete or a canine one, intense training and competition can make certain muscles vulnerable to injury from overuse. Muscles, tendons and ligaments are made to withstand a certain load. When this load is exceeded, small fibres start to get damaged and this results in a weakening of these tissues over time.

Many of the body's muscles perform important joint-stabilising functions, and when they start to weaken, it upsets the body's equilibrium, resulting in pain and strain in other areas of the body. In particular, muscle damage can result in muscle weakness which can lead to joint instabilities.

Injuries can also be as a result of accidents, such as slips and falls, wet grass, or a wet A-frame.



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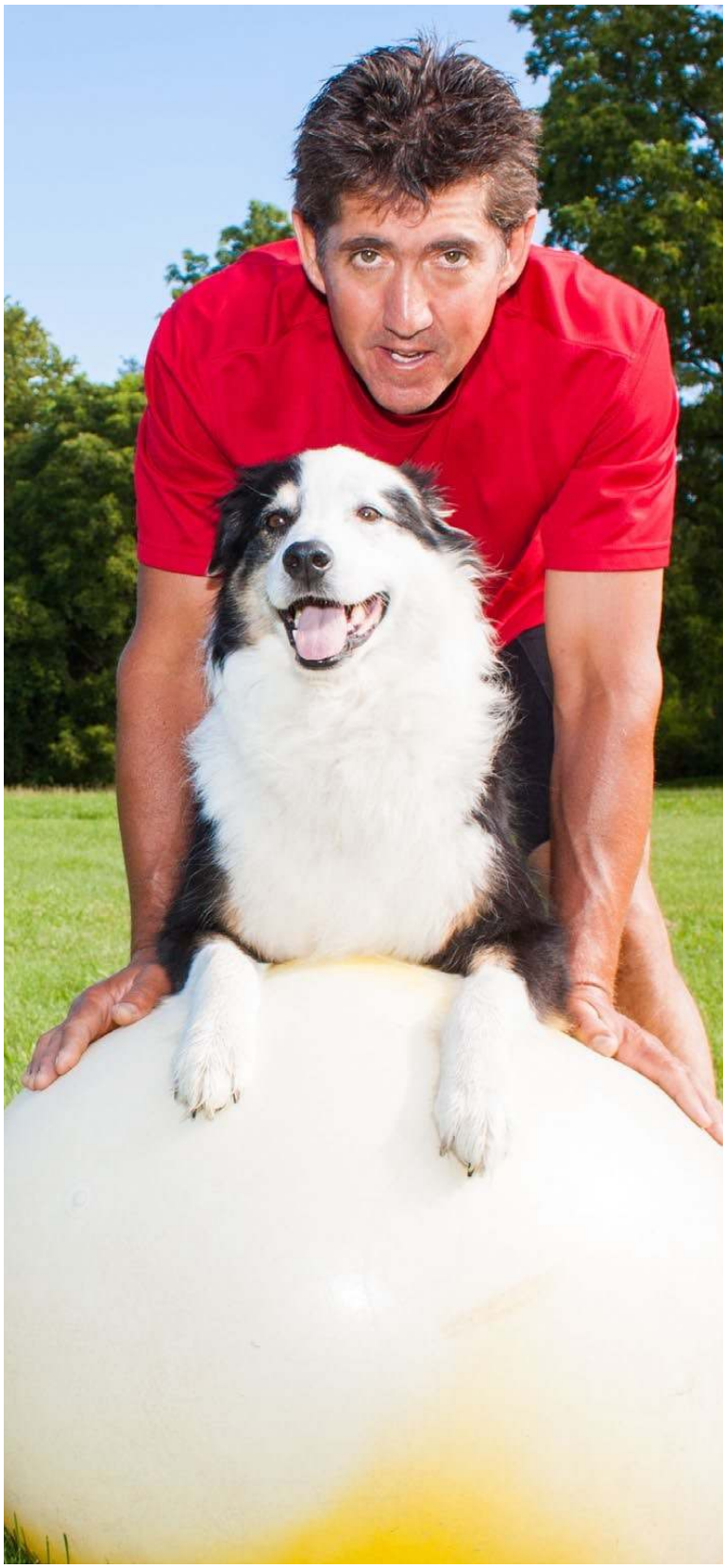
Know the causes, and prevent injuries

Injuries in agility commonly occur because of one or more of the following:

- poor training habits (not warming up, stretching or cooling down, etc)
- structural abnormalities or poor conformation in the dog
- weak core muscles
- other muscle, tendon or ligament weaknesses
- hazards in the training environment



Soft tissue injuries can be extremely frustrating for the agility pet owner. They can take weeks to heal and are often followed by a relapse, especially if the owner starts training and competing at a high level before the injury is completely healed.

Injuries can result in intermittent lameness that decreases performance and, if they become chronic, can spell the end of an agility dog's performance career.

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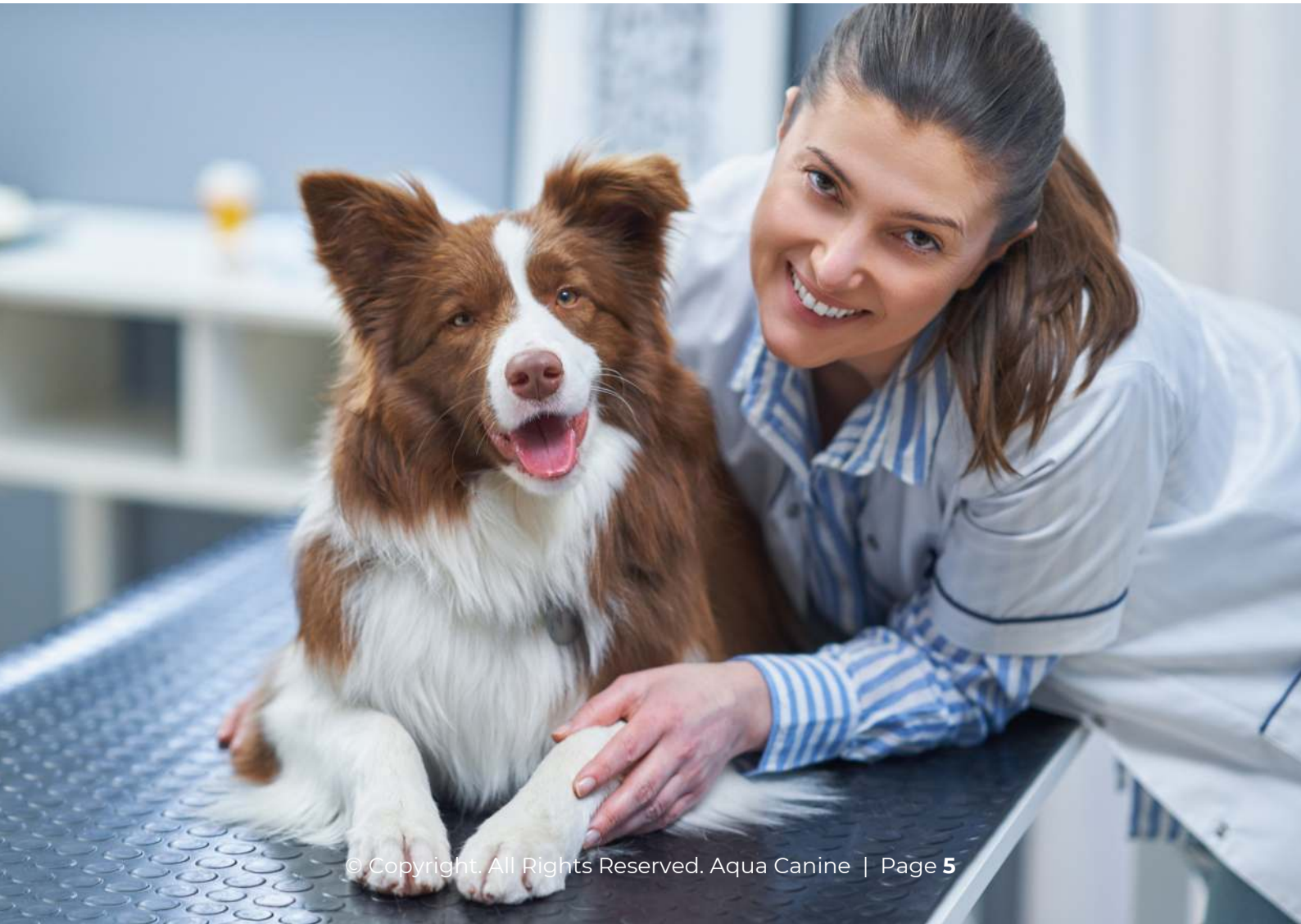
Best practice is to try to prevent injuries. If your pet does get injured, make sure to consult a qualified animal rehabilitation therapist. Animal rehabilitation therapists are trained to treat injured tissue, strengthen the weakened area and maintain the body as a whole throughout the period of healing. All three aspects are important. Once the tissue is healed, the therapist will advise on how to start sports retraining appropriately to get the canine athlete back to their previous level of competition.

When muscles are tight, they have reduced power to act correctly and they pull joints out of alignment. This results in other muscles having to compensate for the improperly functioning muscles, which in turn predisposes the dog to injury.

A little foresight and knowledge can make a huge difference to your dog's enjoyment and success in agility work. Please bear these pointers in mind, and enhance the experience of agility for both you and your dog.



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Easy to prevent

Injuries are easy to prevent if you follow the proper procedures:

1

Warm up

Start slowly with walking and trotting for five to ten minutes. No running. Once the dog is warm, introduce activities that involve active stretching. These are activities where the dog stretches itself, and are known to increase power and acceleration. In contrast, some studies show that static stretching before exercise can decrease performance, especially in running and jumping.

You want to perform active stretching activities that will take all the joints in your dog's body through a full range of motion. This is especially important for the hips, shoulders and spine. Some examples of active stretching include a play bow to stretch the shoulders, standing up against something to stretch the hips, and tight circles to laterally flex the spine.

2

Proper technique and obedience

Find an agility coach and make sure your own and your dog’s technique are correct. Your dog needs to be under control at all times, and for this, obedience training is extremely important. A controlled dog is less likely to get injured.

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3

Listen to your dog

Find an agility coach and make sure your own and your dog's technique are correct. Your dog needs to be under control at all times, and for this, obedience Anyone can have an off day. Check for subtle signs of a problem, such as being slower through the weave poles, knocking poles or difficulties with turning. If you notice any of these signs, stop training or competing to prevent further damage.

You know your dog better than anyone. If something doesn't "feel right" on a particular day, it probably isn't. Dogs want to please us and will push themselves past their limitations in order to do so. This is often when mild trauma occurs, paving the way for weakness and potential injury is extremely important. A controlled dog is less likely to get injured.

4

Training the canine athlete

Training should include exercises targeting specific muscle functions needed for agility, such as core strength, muscle endurance, power and proprioception (balance). Propulsion and braking should be developed as a skill, as should jumping technique.

This spread of exercise types will ensure a properly conditioned canine athlete and decrease the chance of injuries. I am always amazed when I test the core strength of canine athletes, including agility champions; so few have any core strength. These dogs are injuries waiting to happen. If the core is not strong, then the dog will be using the incorrect muscles to stabilise the body, and injuries are inevitable.

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5

Nutrition

Make sure your dog is well hydrated, especially on hot summer days. Dehydration can upset the electrolyte balance in the body, which can predispose your agility dog to cramping. Cramping will decrease performance and can result in further injuries.

Speak to your vet or vet nurse about optimal nutrition for competing dogs.

6

Optimal weight

Adipose tissue is pro-inflammatory and causes inflammation throughout the body. Make sure your agility dog is at the optimum weight as any extra weight will increase the load on the ligaments, tendons, muscles and joints.

7

Cool down

After strenuous exercise, allow your dog's heart rate to come down gradually by decreasing the intensity of the exercises. This allows metabolic wastes to be removed and nutrients and oxygen to flow to the muscles. A cool-down will also aid in preventing stiffness and improve muscle recovery. Static stretching and massage after exercise will prevent tight muscles and muscle spasms.

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8

Muscle maintenance

See a rehabilitation therapist on a regular basis to pick up muscle imbalances at an early stage. He or she will treat the tight, spasming muscles and give advice on strengthening the weak muscles. Alternatively, learn how to massage your own dog, so that you can maintain your pet's muscles properly at home.



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