

# The Best Food-Dispensing Toys 2019

These food-dispensing toys and tools make your dog eat more slowly, keeping him challenged and entertained (without getting fat!).

By **Editorial Staff** - Published: March 19, 2019 Updated: July 29, 2019



If you're not using treat-dispensing toys with your dog, you're missing out on one of the greatest training inventions of the last 100 years – seriously!

These wonderful tools and toys can help you with a long list of dog-training and -management challenges, including boredom-busting, excessively fast eating, high-energy consumption, building mental skills, counter-conditioning, redirecting inappropriate behavior, and much more.

In the mid-1980s, when I acquired my first Australian Kelpie, food-stuffed toys were an unknown. A tennis ball was “the thing” – and Keli, my Kelpie, was quite addicted to hers. Then we discovered the Kong. Still perceived primarily as a fetch toy in those days, the hollow, snowman-shaped, hard, rubber toy delighted my dog with its high-flying unpredictable bounces. Almost as good as herding sheep! She switched her allegiance from ball to Kong.

Then one day Jean Donaldson – dog trainer, founder of the Academy for Dog Trainers, and book author extraordinaire, suggested stuffing treats in the Kong's hollow interior in order to entertain otherwise bored dogs. The food-dispensing dog-toy revolution was on.

The market has expanded since those early days when the Kong Company pretty much had a food-toy monopoly. Or should I say exploded? Today your options include an almost endless variety of products that contain food that will entice and challenge your dog. These products encourage him to chew, lick, nudge, paw, and toss in order to find and reach the food.

We still love the basic Kong toy, as well as the variety of other toys made by Kong. But we have to admit, we also love many of Kong's competitors in the food-stuffable toy category. In fact, there are so many it's hard to even have favorites anymore! But at a minimum, we think you should be aware of how many options are available to you and your dog today, so you can select the ones that are best suited to your own dog's needs and wants.

## Snuffle Mats

It's a simple concept: short pieces of fleece tied onto a flat plastic or rubber frame, creating a tufted surface, ideal for scattering or hiding kibble or treats. Originally, the snuffle mat was a takeoff on the idea of scattering a dog's food in some grass, so it would take him a while to find and eat his meal.

When I first heard of snuffle mats, they were a do-it-yourself project. Not long after, I started seeing mats made by individuals and sold in a small cottage industry, and not long after that, the concept became quite commercialized. While you can still easily make a snuffle mat for your dog, you can also purchase several creative variations, with rubbery fingers instead of fleece tufts, fleece tufts of varying lengths and patterns, and activity mats that include pockets and other treat-finding challenges in addition to the tufts and fingers.



These mats can serve several different purposes. They are perfect for dogs who eat too quickly and are at constant risk of choking on a bowlful of unchewed food or inhaling bits of their food. Sniffing out and retrieving bits of food from the many mat crevices is guaranteed to slow down the most ravenous speed-eater.

Snuffle mats are also useful for keeping your dog occupied during events when she might otherwise get fussy. My dog Kai's snuffle mat was a godsend while he impatiently waited his turn at agility class. The mat kept him calmly and happily searching for treats instead of barking from frustration and arousal at the sight of other dogs running the course.

The mats also may be used to keep your dog from getting bored when left alone (not recommended for a persistent or aggressive chewer!). Just load the mat, set it down for her in her "home-alone" space, and you're good to go.

Some dogs, especially the gentler, less assertive ones, need a little help learning how to use the mat. You may need to start by dropping treats on top, rather than burying them deep in the mat. As your dog gets the idea, you can start pushing treats deeper and deeper into the tufts, until your dog really has to work to get them.

### Benefits

- Toss in the washing machine when they start getting sticky, stinky, or moldy; many can also be put in the dryer.
- The dog gets to use her sense of smell, touch, and taste to find food.

### Caution

- Dogs can chew these up (and ingest them!). Do not leave your dog alone with a snuffle mat if she's an aggressive chewer and/or prone to ingesting non-food items.

### *Whole Dog Journal*-Approved Snuffle Mats

**Darkyazi Snuffle Mat/Nosework Blanket**, \$31

**Paw5's Woolly Snuffle Mat**, \$40, (215) 383-1654

**Petvins Dog Feeding Snuffle Mat**, \$37

**SNiFFiz Smelly Matty**, \$55

### Good instructions for a make-it-yourself snuffle mat

## Fill-with-Food Toys to Lick and Chew

The snowman-shaped Kong toy is still around, of course, and is still a great choice for stuffing food into, as well as a fetch toy. While not indestructible, the black Kongs are very tough and a wise choice for the aggressive chewer. In fact, I still have the original black Kong that Keli happily chased some 30-plus years ago. It's a little worse for wear, but it's still here!

In addition to the classic red and black Kongs, the Kong Company also offers "puppy" Kongs in pink and blue that are a little softer and easier to chew.



Between Kong Company and their competitors (including Busy Buddy, Idepet, Trixie, and others), there is an almost endless list of food-stuffable toys of various shapes, colors, sizes, and materials. Some are grooved, inviting your dog to lick squeeze cheese or peanut butter from the grooves. Some are hollow, encouraging chewing more than licking. You can stuff your dog's entire meal into a few hollow toys, and even freeze them, to slow down the fast eater and keep the bored dog occupied for a longer time. Our freezers almost always contain a few!

### Benefits

- Most are dishwasher safe.
- Wide variety of products; novel products will keep your dog engaged.

### Cautions

- Some dogs have little interest in actively chewing to access treats and food. You may have to encourage yours, or choose a different type of food toy.
- Dogs can chew these up (and ingest them!). Either select super-tough toys specifically designed for aggressive chewers or do not leave your dog alone with her food-stuffed toy if she's an aggressive chewer.

### Whole Dog Journal-Approved Fill-with-Food Toys

**Busy Buddy's Twist'n Treat**, \$5-\$14, depending on size. Available in pet supply stores and online, or from its maker. (866) 738-4379

**Idepet Dog Toy Ball**, \$9

**Kong**, \$7-\$14, depending on size. *See the entire line of classic Kong toys at the company website. Available for purchase in pet supply stores everywhere and online.*

**Kong Genius Leo Food Dispensing Dog Toy**, \$5-\$8, depending on size. *Connect several to add to difficulty. Available in pet supply stores and online.*

## Kibble-Dribbling Toys

I call these products "push toys," because dogs need to push and roll them around in order to get kibble to fall out of them. What they all have in common is a compartment that you can fill with kibble or other small, hard treats, and a hole for the treats to spill out of, provided the dog rolls it over and over.

The first product like this that I ever saw was the Buster Cube – a hard plastic cube with rounded corners and a hole on one side for the treats to spill out of. Omega Paw's Tricky Treat Ball was similar, but made of a softer vinyl material that didn't make such an ungodly racket as a dog rolled and bashed it around, making the food fall out a piece or two at a time.

Today, there are many variations of these kibble-dribbling toys, including those original products. Look for products that won't spill all the goods too quickly, but aren't so difficult to get food out of that your dog gives up in frustration. Another nice feature is the ability to open the toy in order to empty it completely every so often; you don't want pieces of kibble to get stuck inside, grow moldy, and only then fall out and be eaten by your dog.



Kong came out with a product that we like a lot: the Kong Wobbler, which is shaped like the original Kong, but made of two hard plastic halves that screw together, making it incredibly easy to load with kibble or treats and open afterward for cleaning. The bottom half is weighted so that the toy rights itself after each push, which increases the interactive nature of the toy and makes it a bit more engaging than some of the other push toys. Our pot-bellied pig, Dexter, happily eats part of his meal from a Kong Wobbler!

Note that, depending on the level of difficulty, your dog may need to be taught how to use these toys. Roll or push it over several times so she can see the treat fall out (and eat it) each time. Encourage her to use her nose and/or paws to engage the toy until she realizes that she can make the treats appear.

## Benefits



- More interactive than most of these other products; playful dogs will particularly enjoy these.

### Cautions

- Because these toys are meant to be pushed or pawed around in order to dispense the treats, they are not necessarily able to withstand chewing (unlike the products mentioned in the previous category, which are designed to give up their food stuffing by being licked and chewed). These products would not be appropriate for dogs whose go-to tactic is to try to chew the food out of the toy. Dedicated chewers can damage, chew, and ingest pieces of these toys if they are so inclined.
- Be aware! These toys can be very noisy, especially on hard floors.

### Whole Dog Journal-Approved Kibble-Dribblers

**Busy Buddy's Kibble Nibble**, \$11-\$16, depending on size. Available in pet supply stores and online, or from its maker. (866) 738-4379

**Omega Paw's Tricky Treat Ball**, \$5-\$8, depending on size. Available in pet supply stores and online.

**Our Pets Buster Cube**, \$11-\$12, depending on size. Available in pet supply stores and online.

### Slow-Feeder Bowls

In contrast to the push-around toys, these products are designed to be stationary – though they, too, are meant to slow down speed eaters. Slow feeding is believed to decrease the potential for life-threatening choking or bloat, a not-uncommon problem in dogs who inhale their meals.



These products are usually grooved or have pegs in the bowl, requiring the dog to use her tongue to reach the food. They are often weighted and/or equipped with non-skid feet and a wide base to minimize spillage. They may not be quite as challenging as some of the other food-toy products, though this makes them a good choice for dogs who get easily discouraged and stop trying to get treats from the more difficult designs.

### Benefits

- These products work equally well for feeding dry food, wet food, raw frozen, or home-prepared.
- Most are dishwasher-safe.

## Cautions

- The grooves in some designs can make these bowls difficult to wash without a dishwasher.
- Most of these products are made for larger dogs; fewer models are available for small dogs.

## Whole Dog Journal-Approved Slow Feeders

**Kyjen Slo-Bowl Feeder**, \$15. Available in pet supply stores and online.

**Neater Pets' Slow Feeder**, \$27. (877) 917-7387

**Outward Hound's Slo Bowls**, \$10-\$20. Available in pet supply stores and online, as well as from their maker. (800) 477-5735

**QT Dog's Brake-Fast Stainless Steel Dog Bowl**, \$10-\$23, depending on size. Available in pet supply stores and online.

## Licky-Sticky Things

Compared to some of the other food-dispensing toys, "licky-sticky" is a relatively new concept. This category describes products that are meant to be filled with a type of food that the dog can remove only by determined and prolonged licking, such as peanut butter, cream cheese, yogurt, baby food, or a pt-type canned food – and that are designed to be affixed to a stationary position (usually with suction cups).

Prior to the invention of these products, I've suggested to clients that they just smear cheese or peanut butter on the refrigerator door or shower wall. I can see how some might prefer this alternative!

The thing I like best about these is that they can keep your dog relatively immobile, happily occupied, and licking/eating, while you attend to a husbandry task that requires two hands, such as buckling a muzzle, bathing, grooming, taking a temperature, etc. That's so useful that I actually squealed with delight the first time I saw one!



## Benefits

- Because the dog can't carry them off to enjoy in private, these are great for keeping him in one spot, without force or restraint.
- The dog's enjoyment of delicious treats may classically condition him to associate grooming (or whatever you are doing to him while he licks the food) with good things, making him more happier to cooperate and participate.

### Cautions

- These products may not be a good choice for a dog who has food-guarding behavior, unless and until behavior modification has been done.
- If your dog is prone to chewing up toys, don't leave him unattended with any of these products. Most are flexible and not durable, as they are meant for licking, not chewing.

### Whole Dog Journal-Approved Licky-Sticky Things

**Aquapaw Slow Treater Treat Dispensing Mat**, \$11. *Available from Amazon.com and from its maker.*

**Chase 'N Chomp's Sticky Bone**, \$15.

**Helpcook Dog Lick Pad**, \$13.

**Hyper Pet's Lickimat Dog Mat**, \$6-\$10.

**Hyper Pet's Lickimat Dog Soother**, \$5 for creamier treats.

### Interactive Toys and Dog "Puzzles"

Interactive toys have become very popular since they first appeared a decade or so ago – and with good reason. They make a dog work for her treats, with her brain as well as her body! Brain games are incredibly useful for keeping dogs mentally as well as physically healthy.

Swedish dog-toy designer Nina Ottosson started developing her line of interactive toys in 1990. Today, there are dozens of her products on the market, as well as many from other designers. Some are clear-cut imitators, others are quite innovative and original. All are guaranteed to provide dogs with fun and stimulation.

### Benefits

- These are fun for all dogs, but especially useful for helping to entertain and occupy senior, handicapped, or rehabilitating dogs who need to be kept calm.
- Because most of these were designed to have the human interacting with the dog as the dog interacts with the toy, they are also good for relationship-building.



### Cautions

- Some of these interactive toy puzzles are quite complex and challenging. Your dog may need some assistance, at least at first, to help her succeed and learn, and avoid frustration. Start with simpler toys and work up to the more challenging ones once she understands how the games are played.
- The early Nina Ottosson toys were made of wood – easily chewed and hard to clean. More recent models are made of plastic; still some have small pieces that your dog can chew up if you are inattentive.
- These toys are designed to be used under human supervision. Many of them are easily destroyed if left with your dog unattended.

### Whole Dog Journal-Approved Interactive Toys

**Nina Ottosson's** dog puzzles, \$10-\$30. *See complete line of products available on the company website. Available in pet supply stores and online.*

**Trixie Pet Products' Dog Activity Strategy Games**, \$10-\$30. *See complete line of products available on the company website. Available in pet supply stores and online.*

### Electronic Treat Dispensers

Last, but by no means least, is a new generation of computerized electronic food-dispensing toys, giving a whole new look and feel to the treat-dispensing toy market.

The earliest products in this category allowed you use a remote control to release a treat to your dog at a distance from you. Next, they came with timers, so you could release meals or treats at pre-set or random intervals (helpful for preoccupying dogs with separation anxiety or isolation distress). Today, some allow you to dispense treats to (and sometimes, communicate with) your dog from remote locations, via an app on your phone or computer!

Many dog owners and trainers are fascinated with the technology. Some products can be set to beep randomly to signal to your dog that a treat is coming, and some will actually take pictures of your dog as she arrives to eat the treat.





I will confess I'm a technology troglodyte and am pretty intimidated by these products! But I do love the remote treat-dispenser function that allows you to signal to your dog the opportunity for a treat from 50 to 500 feet away, depending on the brand. This type of toy has many helpful applications, such as when visitors arrive, you can use its function to move your dog away from the door (as he runs to get his treats from the machine that you have set up elsewhere). Other training and management applications include situations where you want the dog to go to her bed, move away from begging at the table, stop obsessing over squirrels or UPS trucks outside, and more.

### Benefits

- Brilliant for engaging dogs who are easily bored when left home alone. Anticipation of random treats can keep the canine brain engaged and out of trouble.
- Surveillance features (still camera, one-or two-way audio, video, and/or live-stream monitoring), ease owner anxieties about home-alone dogs, too.

## Cautions

- The remote treat-dispensing function can potentially cause problems in a multi-dog household, especially if there is competition for resources. Be careful!
- Some of the fancier high-tech products require a fair amount of Internet bandwidth to function. If you are on satellite/limited bandwidth, they may not work or be optimal for you.
- You do need to be somewhat tech-savvy – or have access to someone who is – to figure some of this stuff out!
- These can be quite pricey.

## Whole Dog Journal-Approved Electronic Treat Dispensers

**Furbo Dog Camera**, \$199. *Dispenses treats via phone app; also takes video and allows two-way audio.*

**PetCube Bites**, \$249. *HD pet camera that allows you to monitor and talk to your dog and fling treats via app. (888) 447-2522*

**PetSafe Treat & Train Remote Reward Dog Trainer**, \$120. *Dispenses treats via remote control.*

**Ready Treat Remote Treat Dispenser**, \$50. *Dispenses only one serving of treats via remote control before needing to be reloaded.*

**Smart Animal Training's Pet Tutor**, \$299. *Can be operated with remote control as well as phone app; can be programmed to release food randomly or at set intervals. (877) 250-2694*

## Lots to Choose From

As you can see, there are many options for teaching your dog to play with her food. A list of examples of products in each category appears on page 22. Find the ones that are likely to appeal to her – and to you – and get started!

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