

## What are some good chew toys for my lab?



Labs are genetically predisposed to chewing. The same instincts that make Labradors great retrievers also make them want to expend their energy chewing. Chewing is a normal and healthy behavior that should be encouraged and directed in appropriate ways. Not only do chew toys allow labs to use their natural instincts, but chewing helps to exercise their jaws, get rid of excess energy, and can help clean their teeth.

Most dogs love rawhides. Since labs are generally “power-chewers” I recommend getting either compressed rawhide or retriever rolls for maximum chewing time. The knotted rawhides and most rawhide shapes just don’t last as long at our house.

However, rawhides just don’t do well with some dogs and can cause diarrhea, gas, or vomiting. I don’t know why, although it could have something to do with the chemicals they use to process the hide – some countries may use formaldehyde or arsenic in the curing process. The recommendation is to only use rawhide that says “made in the USA” because we have stricter processing standards here than they do in other parts of the world. If your dog does well with rawhide that’s great and there really is no reason to stop giving you dog a supervised rawhide treat. Please make sure to watch your dog when he is chewing on his rawhide as larger pieces can pose a choking hazard if swallowed.

Nylabones may offer a safer option. There are three levels of bone hardness – gumabone is the softest, then regular nylabone, and Galileo bones which are the hardest. A regular nylabone or Galileo would be the best bet for most Labradors. Nylabone also makes edible bones. Depending on how powerful a chewer your dog is, these bones may last quite awhile or only a few minutes. In our house we’ve found carrots to last just as long and be much less expensive. (Photo: former L.E.A.R.N. foster dog, Beamish, shows off his Galileo bone (left) and a sterilized beef bone (right).)



Kong toys look like a red or black beehive and can be found at just about any pet store. You can put any type of treats into a Kong - <http://www.kongcompany.com/how2use.html> has a variety of recipes that you can try, or you can make up your own. To make a Kong last a little longer you can try freezing it. Also, the tighter you pack a Kong, the harder it is to get the food out. I find using both soft and mushy items in a large black Kong works well. We use over ripe banana, left over bread, rice or noodles, and mushy cooked carrots all seem to take a little longer, especially if there is frozen peanut butter or cream cheese over the top and all of the ingredients are packed in tightly.

You can also stuff treats into a sterilized bone. I get mine from Dr. Foster and Smith and none of them have splintered yet, although after 2 years they are getting ragged and need to be thrown out. Not only do the dogs have to work to get the goodies out of the middle (which is a little harder than a Kong because the bones are longer), but some dogs just like to chew on the plain bone. A marrow bone could be another option along these same lines. Get a large, raw soup bone from your butcher or grocery store. Be careful where your dog chews on one of these because they are quite messy and greasy. These are very rich and can make your dog's stomach a little upset, so give them under supervision and with moderation. These are not to be eaten in one sitting!

You could also try giving your dog meals in a Buster Cube or Molecuball. Both make the dog figure out how to get food out of a hole in the toy. My dogs have been known to spend 30-45 minutes rolling the toys with their noses and batting at it with their paws. My preference is for the Molecuball because it's a little quieter and sturdier, but it's easier to make the treats come out. The Buster Ball is more challenging but pretty loud. I've found that if I put some broken bits of dog biscuit in a Molecuball, then the food doesn't come out as easily. (Photo: Beamish shows off his treat-hunting prowess with a large Molecuball.)



If you really want to torture, er, challenge, your dog, you can knot the food toys in an old rag before giving it to your dog. Then the dog has to figure out how to get the rag open before getting to the toy and then the food. Make sure to keep an eye on your dog, though, to make sure that she doesn't eat the rag.

Outdoors in warm weather, or in any stain-proof area, you can try giving your dog popsicles. Use any size container and fill it with water that's been flavored with low-sodium beef or chicken broth. Most dogs really enjoy chewing on ice and I redirected many inappropriate puppy chew fests by giving my dog a chunk of ice to chew on. In puppies the popsicle not only tastes good and gives the dog something to do, but it can also help to numb the sore gums in a teething puppy. An alternative to a puppy popsicle would be to soak a rope bone in broth or water and freeze it. (Photo: Beamish poses with his rope bone.)

