

Sling Walking

Your dog may need help to walk if their hind legs are very weak or paralysed, for example during recovery from trauma or intervertebral disc disease. Some of these dogs cannot move their hind legs at all. Others are able to move their hind legs a little but cannot yet take proper steps.

Why use a hindquarter sling?

Without any help, these dogs either fall or drag their hind legs along the ground when trying to walk. It's not a good idea to let your dog drag himself along. Firstly, dragging can damage the skin where it scrapes along the ground. Secondly, your dog will find it very hard to walk properly again once they've got into the habit of dragging themselves along. A good way to learn to walk is to be given some physical support while 'having a go' at walking. The aims of sling-walking are to keep the dog safe as they try to walk, and to help them learn to walk.

When to use a hindquarter sling

Take your recovering dog out for toileting (to pee and poo) for up to five minutes at a time at least three times daily. Ask your vet to advise you on how many times to take them out per day. If your dog can't walk (if they fall, drag themselves along, or keep placing their paws upside-down) help them with a hindquarter sling.



Above: If your dog cannot walk without knuckling or dragging their paws, support their hindquarters with a sling.

Choosing a hindquarter sling

There are three main types of sling:

1) A simple 'scarf-style' sling. This is a long piece of fabric that loops under the dog's belly. This is the type of sling most often used for dachshunds and other small dogs. You can get a similar effect by using a long scarf. Good slings have adjustable handles so you can set them at the right height. Then you won't need to stoop. This type of sling should be soft and not too narrow, otherwise it will dig into your dog's belly. For male dogs, it should also not be too wide, otherwise your dog won't have room to pee. For male dogs, the width of the sling should be a little less than the distance between the front of his thigh and the front of his penis. If the sling or scarf is too wide, you may need to fold it back onto itself at the front to leave space for your male dog to urinate.



Above: A scarf-style sling supports your dog under their belly

2) A hip-lift sling. This sling has two holes, one for each hind leg. It offers support around the hind legs where it's needed. These slings have strappy handles. Choose a sling that fits snugly enough to give support but that doesn't pinch or chafe your dog's skin. It should leave room for your dog to urinate and defecate. The handles should adjust so that you can support your dog without stooping. You may need to search around to find the sling that best fits your dog.



Above: A hip-lift sling gives support just where it's needed.

3) For large breeds and tall dogs, a short-handled hip-lift sling that supports the hindquarters is a good investment.

Lead and harness

While walking on a hindquarter sling, keep your dog on the lead. This is important. Not only does the lead stop your dog from rushing off, but it also helps to slow their front end down so that they can learn to step with their hind legs.



Above: Use a lead to slow your dog so that their hind legs have a chance to step.

It's far better to attach the lead to a good chest harness than to a collar. Firstly, the lead attachment on a harness is further back than it is on a collar, so it helps to spread your dog's weight more evenly as they learn to walk again. Secondly, the neck is a delicate area. It's therefore best not to attach the lead here, especially while the dog is relearning how to walk and may lose their balance now and again.

Never do 'tail walking'!

Never try to support your dog's weight by their tail! 'Tail-walking' can be painful for the dog, and it can cause bruising and longer-term damage to the rear end of the spine and/or to the delicate nerve roots. Support your dog with a sling instead. If you don't yet have a sling, use a scarf, long towel or, very tiny dogs, a fluffy bathrobe belt.