



Guide Dogs for the Blind

Guidelines for Use of High Value Food Rewards

High Value (HV) food reward is a type of food that is perceived by the dog as being more reinforcing than kibble rewards and elicits a strong positive emotional response from the dog.

Most GDB puppies will not need HV food as they naturally have a very strong interest in eating regular kibble. Ideally, this same kibble is used for food rewards. Many puppies, new to the raiser home, will take a while to learn how to take food reward from the raiser's hand; this is not to be considered a lack of food drive. Some new puppies will show more interest in kibble that has been slightly moistened before offering as a food reward. These puppies can be weaned to dry kibble rewards within a week or so.

Only the CFR can authorize the use of HV food rewards. If the raiser believes the puppy lacks interest in kibble rewards, the leader should consult with the CFR as to whether HV food rewards are necessary. The puppy should first be assessed for normal food interest at mealtimes. Some puppies may have their food interest increased by reducing the amount of food fed at mealtimes. (If the puppy lifts its head and looks around while eating and/or walks away from the food bowl this may indicate that the puppy is being overfed. Sometimes just cutting the amount of food back for a while, combined with removing the food if the puppy walks away from it, will help increase the puppy's food interest.)

HV Food Reward May be Considered When:

- A puppy has low food interest generally. Care must be taken with these puppies that the majority of the puppy's food intake is still in the form of a balanced kibble. These puppies should be weaned off exclusive use of HV food rewards to a blend of kibble and HV (see below) as soon as possible to ensure they are eating a sufficient amount of dog food.
- A puppy is having some confidence issues and when a little stressed, does not find kibble rewards as appealing as it finds them in a home environment. Obviously it is best to try to socialize the puppy slowly and not rely exclusively on HV food to overcome fear in the puppy.
- A puppy has high distractibility and prefers to engage in the distraction over eating food rewards. When counter-conditioning with food, it is preferable to increase the distance away from the distraction, and decrease the level of distraction, rather than relying on HV food to keep the puppy focused.

- A puppy is having difficulty with a particular behavior/situation and needs extra motivation to overcome the difficulty. Examples could be a puppy that has had a bad experience or a puppy that finds some aspect of handling/socialization particularly challenging.

Types of High Value Food Rewards

It is preferable that the puppy be rewarded with treats that are made for dogs. This ensures that the food is balanced and is less likely to cause intestinal upset. Soft treats are accepted better and eaten more quickly. Any treats should be broken or cut up into pieces no larger than an eraser on a pencil (even smaller for young puppies.)

Suggested brands:

- Natural Balance products, such as their rolls which are economical and can be diced up, they have other quality soft treats too.
- Red Barn rolls are similar.
- Zukes treats are excellent quality.
- Lickety Stick and Leanlix are two products that are conveniently packaged a little like a roll-on deodorant; the puppy licks the end to get his reward. Sometimes just a different brand of kibble is accepted as a novel treat; care should be taken that a sufficiently small amount is used so as not to cause GI upset.

“People Food”

Recognizing that dog treats can be expensive, *short-term* use of cheese or hot dogs as HV food reward is allowable. String cheese or hot dogs should be sliced thinner than a nickel then halved, or quartered for young puppies. If large amounts of HV food (over ¼ cup per day) are needed for training and socialization, or HV food must be used regularly for several weeks, dog treats are preferred over cheese and hot dogs. Hot dog pieces may be dried out in the microwave to make them less messy to handle.

“Trail Mix”

Some puppies with very low food interest may need a bit of variety in their food rewards. A CFR may advise a “trail mix” of different high value rewards, possibly mixed with kibble, to keep such dogs engaged. As well as the novelty appeal for low food interest dogs, a mixture allows the raiser to use food rewards appropriate to the scenario throughout the day. In a less challenging environment kibble rewards may suffice; a mix of foods allows the handler to opt for HV food if the puppy needs it to stay engaged.

Weaning Off High Value Food Rewards

Puppies should be weaned off HV food rewards to kibble rewards as soon as possible. The goal is to have puppies working for food rewards that are the same as (part of) their regular meal. A good way to introduce the lower food interested puppy to working for kibble is to mix the HV food with kibble in the bait bag. The HV food will make the kibble more appealing due to the odor of the HV infusing the kibble. Once the puppy is working well and accepting kibble enthusiastically from the mixed food in the bag, the HV food amount can be decreased daily.