



Decreasing Treats

If you have been doing counterconditioning for a while now and your dog is doing well in the sessions with scattered treats, you might wonder when you can decrease or completely wean the treats.

As always - our dog's reactions will guide us in that transition. You already know that we cannot do any one thing to make our dog less reactive.

Instead, we provide well-planned setups that allow his brain to make positive experiences and "overwrite" the old, negative conditioned emotional response.

In these sessions our plan is to link the trigger to sniffing treats, which is calming and positive for your dog. Eventually we will have had enough repetitions of this that the trigger itself will elicit a neutral, calm response from the dog. At this point, we do no longer need the treats to facilitate the right response.

As a general rule, most owners want to wean the treats too early. You need to keep in mind that in the training process we have to undo and retrain whatever reactive behaviors your dog has ingrained in the past.

If your dog has been reactive on leash for the last 3 years, then you definitely are not ready to completely wean all treats after 2 weeks of training. The risk that the old behaviors will break through eventually is too high. Your dog has a mountain of experiences of linking his trigger to negative responses and only a tiny pile of good experiences yet. You are on a great path, but you certainly are not at the final goal yet. If you get impatient and reduce treats too early, chances are your dog will regress and cross his threshold - because he has not yet fully ingrained the new, positive or neutral response.

You are ready to reduce treats a bit if your dog's initial response when encountering the trigger is not negative at all anymore. So let's say your dog used to freak out when he saw other dogs. And now, he sees other dogs and then either just calmly looks at them, or maybe he turns around and looks at you for a treat.

This means that he is starting to change how he feels about the trigger itself without needing the presence of treats to create that right mindset for him.



In this case, you can start to give fewer treats to your dog. Do not go from a lot of treats to zero treats - this is too much of a change. Just gradually reduce the amount of treats you scatter and be very attentive to your dog's reaction throughout the process.

Observe what exactly your dog is doing during the time that he is not eating. If he is sniffing the ground regardless, or calmly looking at the trigger or at you or otherwise in a calm state of mind - perfect.

If you notice that your dog is becoming more agitated when there are not as many treats to eat - then you know to go back to more treats again.

Eating treats can somewhat "mask" where our dogs are in the training process, especially very food-motivated dogs. So a dog that actually has a changed CER and a dog that still has a somewhat negative CER will both look mostly the same while they are eating.

Only when we reduce the treats and the amount of time the dog spends eating we sort of pull back the curtain and see what the dog really feels about the trigger. A calm dog means that we can indeed continue to reduce treats.

An agitated dog means that we still have some ways to go with changing the CER and that we will regress if we do not provide more treats or decrease the intensity of the trigger.

Speaking of decreasing the intensity of the trigger, you can combine this with decreasing treats. We'll take an auditory trigger for example.

Let's say you have been working with your dog with recordings of barking dogs, at a medium or high volume with near-constant treats. When reducing those treats, you could also turn down the volume to a low setting. This way we make sure that the dog is definitely not in "near threshold territory" and we will be more likely to see him calm with fewer treats.

I am often asked when no treats whatsoever are needed anymore. I actually am not a fan of ever completely saying goodbye to all treats. This is because we can just never completely predict the world around us. Even when a dog is doing very well with greatly reduced treats in set up situations, you should still carry some when you're out on walks.

I can guarantee that one day you will come across a scenario where you will be very glad you are carrying those treats. Maybe it has to do with reactivity, but maybe not. I personally nearly always carry treats, and they have come in handy in so many different situations.



Like that one time that Fusion picked up a dead bird in the forest and I told him to drop it and he did. If I had not rewarded this, I am sure he would have thought twice about dropping such a great treasure the next time.

Maybe your dog's collar or harness breaks one day and you will be glad you had some treats with which you could quickly lure your dog back to you. Or maybe they have a sticker in their paw and by distracting them with treats you get them to hold still long enough to remove it.

I can tell you that I actually do not know any professional dog trainer who does NOT usually carry some treats when out with their dogs. It is pretty little effort for the benefit of always being able to work well with your dog.

You can put the treats right next to the poop bags and just grab them as you're heading out.

And if you don't use them - that's also good.

But if you are in a position where you need them, you will be really happy you made a habit of always taking some treats.

The takeaway from this segment is:

Be patient in weaning the treats. Always observe how your dog does with decreased treats. If fewer treats bring the reactive side of your dog back, you probably did not have enough repetitions yet to change his conditioned emotional response

Long-term, you should not see never carrying treats as a goal. It is much smarter to always carry some treats (you don't have to use them), but to be prepared in case you do need them in some unexpected event.