



Physical Health Check Guideline

Version: 1.0

Commencement Date: 23 July 2025

Review Date: 23 June 2026

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Citation:

Working Animals Federation of Australia (WAFA), "Physical Health Check Guideline", Version 1.0
June 23, 2025, www.workinganimals.com.au/guidance

Purpose

To ensure early detection of health issues, maintain the dog's well-being, and monitor overall physical condition through routine, systematic health checks.

Scope

This Guideline applies to all dog handlers, trainers, and caregivers responsible for the health and welfare of working or companion dogs.

Preparation

- Create a calm environment: Perform the check in a quiet, comfortable, and well-lit area to minimise stress.
- Gather necessary supplies: Clean towels, gloves (optional), a flashlight or penlight, cotton balls, and a checklist for recording observations.
- Ensure safety: Keep the dog on a secure leash or in a confined area. Use a muzzle if necessary and if trained to do so.

Step-by-Step Physical Health Check

General Appearance and Behaviour

- Assess posture, gait, and movement; note limping, stiffness, or unusual behaviour.
- Observe overall demeanor: alertness, responsiveness, signs of distress or lethargy.
- Check coat for shine, texture, and cleanliness; note hair loss, dandruff, mats, or parasites (fleas, ticks).

Eyes

- Check for clarity and brightness; eyes should be clear, not cloudy or red.
- Look for discharge, swelling, redness, or excessive tearing.
- Use a flashlight to check pupils' response to light.

Ears

- Inspect outer ear for redness, swelling, discharge, or foul odor.
- Gently smell for unusual odors indicating infection.
- If trained, examine the inner ear canal carefully using a light source, avoiding injury.

Nose

- Check moisture and temperature; nose should be cool and moist but not dry or cracked.
- Look for discharge, bleeding, or crusting around nostrils.

Mouth and Teeth

- Lift lips to examine gums (pink, not pale or red), teeth (clean, no excessive tartar), and tongue.
- Check for bad breath, sores, swelling, or broken teeth.
- Observe for swallowing or chewing difficulties.

Neck and Throat

- Palpate gently for lumps, swelling, or pain.
- Check for abnormal sounds during breathing or swallowing.

Skin and Coat

- Run hands over the body to feel for lumps, bumps, cuts, or abrasions.
- Check for hot spots, dry patches, or signs of itching.
- Inspect under tail and between toes for irritation or infections.

Limbs and Joints

- Observe walking, standing, and sitting.
- Palpate joints for swelling, heat, or pain reactions.
- Check paw pads for cuts, cracks, foreign objects, or infection.

Body Condition and Weight

- Assess body condition score (BCS) visually and by palpation; ribs should be felt but not prominent.
- Note sudden changes in weight or muscle mass.

Abdomen

- Gently palpate for tenderness, swelling, or abnormalities.
- Observe for bloating or discomfort.

Tail

- Inspect for injury, swelling, or abnormal posture.
- Check base for irritation or parasites.

Vital Signs

- Temperature: Using a digital thermometer if trained.
- Pulse: Heart rate via femoral artery (inner thigh).

- Respiration: Observe breathing rate and effort.

Frequency Recommendation

- A physical health check should be performed at least once weekly for working dogs and before each period of active work or public access to ensure the dog is fit and healthy to perform its duties.
- Additional checks may be performed if the dog shows signs of illness, injury, or changes in behaviour.

Post-Check Actions

- Record abnormalities or concerns in a health log.
- Consult a veterinarian promptly if signs of illness, injury, or distress are detected.
- Maintain regular check schedules — ideally weekly or monthly depending on the dog's role and health status.
- Provide positive reinforcement and calm reassurance throughout the check.

Safety and Handling Tips

- Approach the dog calmly and respectfully.
- Watch for signs of discomfort or aggression; stop the check if the dog becomes stressed or defensive.
- Use treats and praise to create a positive experience.
- Seek professional training if unsure how to safely conduct health checks.

Review

This guideline will be reviewed annually or as necessary to ensure alignment with evolving industry standards, accessibility requirements, and WAFA's strategic mission.

Note: This guideline is intended for routine health monitoring and does not replace professional veterinary examinations.

Document Control

Version	Date	Author	Change Description	Approved By
V1.0	23/07/2025	V. Solomon	Initial	C.Williams