

Tasty Treats

—Isa Helfrich, German Shepherd & therapy dog (typed by Deb Helfrich, Vice President)



Question: Dear Isa, is it okay to use food treats on a visit?

Ah, a subject I have tremendous interest in—treats, yum! If I didn't write this column as a TDV volunteer, I'd want to be paid in treats for sure!

Treats can be a great tool for many purposes. A handler may use food treats to make a positive visitation experience for a new or slightly shy therapy dog, reward a dog for doing something particularly difficult or challenging, or to allow people to interact with the dog by feeding him or her. However, there are a few things to consider when thinking about food treats in a visitation environment:

- Are you using treats to control your dog's behavior? Will your dog only listen/work if you have liver in your hand? Are you using treats to mask a behavioral problem? If so, when the treats run out or if you forget to bring them, does your dog turn from Jeckyl into Hyde?
- Many facilities do not allow treats (or the feeding of the dog at all), due to hygiene and infection control.
- If you allow patients and visitors to feed your dog treats, is he gentle when taking them and totally non-aggressive about food? Are you able to control the situation safely? For example, several children waiving cookies at your dog or several dogs interested in getting their lips on the one and only food treat in an elder's hand can quickly turn into a chaotic, unsafe situation.
- Is the use of food distracting to other teams you may be working with? Does it promote food possession among the dogs working together?
- Are you using so many treats that Fido is gaining 10 lbs with every visit?
- Is food actually distracting to your dog—instead of helping him/her work, engage and focus, does your dog become so focused on food so that he/she isn't interested in visiting?

Ask Isa...