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Canine Agility Injury Update, 2022–2026

What the newer surveys actually tell us — and why you should care when that Border Collie walks through the door.

Welcome back to the sporting-dog files.

The last time Four Leg did a dedicated agility research dump was 2021. Since then the survey pile has grown: Finland, Sweden, North America, substrate, stifles, Border Collies as their own population, and a 2026 look at the dogwalk itself.

These are still mostly owner questionnaires. Definitions of “injury” bounce around (often “kept the dog out of agility for a week or more”). So treat the numbers as patterns, not gospel. That said, the patterns keep repeating — and they line up with what we see in clinic.

Grab a coffee. This one is meant to be savoured.

Cheers,
Laurie Edge-Hughes



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The Big Picture First

If you only remember three numbers, make them these:

- About 4 in 10 agility dogs in the large international surveys have had a time-loss injury (Pechette Markley 2021; Pechette Markley 2022; Sundby 2022).
- About 1 in 7 have had a long one – out more than three months.
- In Finnish competition dogs, the on-course rate was 1.44 injuries per 1,000 runs (Inkilä 2022).

Widen the net and the numbers jump. Sellon (2023) found 77% of handlers had at least one dog injured enough to change or stop agility. Essner (2024), looking at Swedish sporting and utility trial dogs (not agility-only), got a lifetime any-injury figure of 59%.

Geography matters a bit: same 2021 survey, Australia 53%, United States 40%.

Most injuries still happen in training, not at the trial. And a lot of them show up in the second half of the session. Fatigue is real for dogs too!

Clinical Relevance

Treat injury as a common feature of the sport, not a rare event. When an agility dog arrives “a bit off,” the prior-injury question is not small talk.

Ask:

- How many time-loss agility injuries has this dog already had?
- Did this one start in training or at a trial – and in the first or second half of the session?
- How many runs that day before they noticed it?

Most of these papers count owner-reported time-loss, not a veterinary diagnosis. Translate that. “Kept out a week” can be a mild sprain or strain. Your job is to find out which one walked in. Also useful: competition incidence of 1.44 per 1,000 runs sounds tiny until you remember a busy dog can rack up that many runs in a season.

Where They Get Hurt

You already know this list. The new research papers just keep putting the same body parts at the top of the page.

The usual suspects

- Shoulder / scapula / upper arm
- Iliopsoas
- Digits, pads, nails
- Back — thoracic through lumbosacral
- Stifle

Forelimb still wins. Inkilä (2022) had front limb in 61% of year-specific agility injuries. Lameness was the sign handlers noticed first (65%). Muscle strain was the most common “type” they named (42%).

Pechette Markley (2021) is still the best snapshot of named diagnoses among injured dogs:

- Shoulder: biceps tendinopathy, medial shoulder issues, supraspinatus
- Iliopsoas: strain
- Digits: sprain/strain, torn nail, fracture
- Stifle: CCL tear

Kieves (2024) zoomed in on the stifle alone: 5.2% of 4,197 dogs had a stifle time-loss injury. Almost half of those were CCL. Patellar luxation made up most of the rest.

Obstacles that keep getting named: jumps first, then contacts (dogwalk and A-frame), tunnels, weaves.

Clinical Relevance

We are still looking primarily for shoulder, iliopsoas, digits, thoracolumbar/lumbosacral spine, & stifle. Practical intake habits that match the data:

- Palpate and compare both shoulders even when the complaint is “tight in the groin.”
- Look at nails, pads, and individual digits on every agility dog.
- Do not skip the back because the limp is front-end. Never skip the back!
- Stifle is less common than shoulder in the big surveys, but when it is the stifle, Kieves found almost half were CCL.

Who Walks In Already Stacked Against The Odds?

Border Collies. Again.

Not a surprise. Still worth putting in writing, because it is the most consistent finding in the whole pile.

- 52% of Border Collies in the big 2021 survey vs 42% overall
- Odds ratios around 1.9–2.3 for any injury (Sundby 2022)
- In a Border Collie-only analysis: 52% any injury, 21% out more than three months (Pechette Markley 2024)
- Higher stifle odds (Kieves 2024, OR 1.63)
- Higher dogwalk-injury odds after an incident (Inkilä 2026, OR 2.73)
- In Swedish sporting/utility dogs, Border Collies and Belgian Malinois both had higher adjusted odds of a lifetime injury history (Essner 2024)

Taller Border Collies picked up more digit injuries.

Heavy for their height

Same height, more kilos: higher odds of any injury and of stifle injury (about 1.4 times per extra 10 lb / 4.5 kg in Kieves 2024). Note: You cannot score BCS from these surveys, so do not pretend they proved obesity. You can put height and weight on the chart and notice the stocky 20-inch dog versus the rangy one.

Taller dogs of the same weight had lower stifle odds. Taller dogs in general had more dogwalk wobbles and falls.



Stacked Against The Odds continued...

Early spay / neuter — but only when they looked at stifles

Kieves (2024):

- Males neutered before 10 months: OR 2.32
- Females spayed before first heat: OR 2.81

Sundby (2022) did not find overall spay/neuter status linked to any-injury history. Different question, different answer. Worth keeping those two papers side by side.

The “this dog has been here before” file

Inkilä (2022) is the one that should make you pay attention. Dogs with two or more previous agility injuries had an odds ratio of 11.36 for another one. One prior injury was not a big deal. Two-plus was a “chronic repeat offender”.

Lumbosacral transitional vertebra also landed in that model (OR 2.72).

Handlers and how the dog arrived

- Handlers 65 and older: lower injury odds. Handlers 18–24: higher, including for stifles.
- Dogs acquired after 12 months of age: lower odds.
- Border Collies from rescue/shelter: lower odds than those from breeders.
- Radiographs “to check growth plates” were associated with *higher* injury and severe-injury odds in Sundby 2022. That may say as much about the training plan that followed the films as it does about the films.

Older dogs have higher *lifetime* injury counts — they have had more years to collect them. On the dogwalk specifically, older dogs actually had *fewer* incidents. Experience helps you stay on the plank. It does not erase a career of accumulated bangs.



Training and Trial Choices

This is the closest we get to “modifiable” factors. Still survey data. Still not a training manual. Just what kept surviving the statistics and where we should pay attention.

Jump height vs withers

Jumping 2–4 inches, or 4+ inches, *above* shoulder height tracked with higher injury odds (ORs 1.31 and 1.50). Same story in the Border Collie-only paper. Jumping well *below* height also looked riskier in Border Collies – which may be reverse causality (the already-sore dog got dropped a height class).

When the hard stuff starts

Starting jump work between about 3 and 18 months looked riskier than waiting until after 18 months. In Border Collies, elbow-height jumps before 10 months, or right around 13–15 months, clustered with both any injury and the long ones. In the combined training model, the highest injury odds were in dogs that started jump training early (about 3–12 months) but did not start weave or teeter training until after 18 months. Starting weaves and teeter earlier, among dogs who began jumps at the same age, was associated with lower injury odds (Pechette Markley 2022)

How often they train and trial

- More than two agility sessions a week: higher injury odds in Finland study.
- A moderate competition schedule (about 1.5 to 3 runs a month) looked protective compared with barely competing.
- National-level competition kept showing up as higher odds.
- Planning the calendar around “the big event” also tracked higher.
- The 26-weekend-a-year dogs sometimes looked safer once the models were adjusted. That may be the fit dogs who can handle it – or the handlers who already pulled the sore ones back. The papers cannot tell those two stories apart.

Contact style

A-frame “neither fully stopped nor fully running” was protective in Inkilä 2022. Teeter dogs with no specific end behaviour had lower stifle odds in Kieves 2024. Running vs stopped on the dogwalk did not change fall rates in 2026.

Surfaces & The Dogwalk

Rubber mat is the surface handlers love to hate

Jimenez (2022) is the substrate paper.

Rubber mat had the highest training-injuries (32% of dogs who trained on it) and was blamed by handlers in 88% of those injuries. It also scored worst for “my dog looks off on this surface.”

Grass and dirt looked the best for performance. Training on varied surfaces did not protect against injury.

Two-thirds of handlers changed how they used surfaces after an injury. They voted with their feet. After an injury, 66.9% of those handlers changed their dog’s routine. The most common changes were using a surface less (45.0%) or dropping it entirely (34.1%)

In Finland, most 2019 injuries still happened on a surface the dog already knew from weekly training. Familiar is not the same as safe.

The dogwalk, counted properly

Inkilä (2026) finally gave us a denominator.

Over six months:

- 15% of dogs had at least one fall
- 30% had at least one close call
- 2.6 falls and 0.6 injuries per 1,000 dogwalks
- Only about 5% of incidents produced a time-loss injury

What handlers thought went wrong: crooked approach, coming in hot, handling bobble, dog’s balance. Taller dogs, more dogwalk reps, Border Collies, and inexperienced handlers stacked the injury side. Age and a higher competition level of the dog stacked the “stayed on the plank” side.



Finland changed the approach rule in 2023 so dogs would have a better chance at a straight line. This study did not detect a drop in incidents after that change.



After The Injury: time off, retirement, and what handlers wished was studied

Inkilä (2022): back to normal pet life in about two weeks; back to previous agility level in about four. Roughly **1 in 10 of these injured dogs retired** from the sport because of that injury.

Jimenez: 5.5% retired after the injury they were asked about.

Essner (broader sporting/utility group): most returned — 82% to training, 74% to competition — and 66% got some form of rehab.

Sellon asked why dogs leave the sport. Top answers: getting older, lameness, behaviour/stress, medical issues that had nothing to do with agility, neck or back pain.

Same paper asked handlers what research they actually want. The list barely changed across organisations or experience levels:

1. Risk factors for specific injuries
2. Equipment and course design
3. Conditioning that might prevent the next one

Shoulder, back, and iliopsoas were the body parts they wanted on the research docket first. That tracks with the injury maps above. They are asking us to study the things they already keep bringing into the clinic.



If you only take-away five things from these studies

1. Time-loss injury is common. Plan for it and educate owners to expect it.
2. Shoulder, iliopsoas, digits, spine, and stifle — always check these.
3. Border Collies, higher weight-to-height, prior injuries (especially two or more), and early gonadectomy (for stifles) score higher for risk of injury.
4. Jump height above the withers, high weekly training load, and early high-impact skill work are the training glitches that showed up most often.
5. Rubber mats and the dogwalk deserve a closer look than “the dog just slipped.”

No paper in this set tells you how to rehab the injury. That was never the brief. They tell you what to expect, what questions you might ask, and some tidbits on what to discuss.

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Next Four Leg News, we will look at
Injuries, Treatments, & Return to Sport



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