

Peer Reviewed

Walking Dogs: Why It Makes a Difference & How to Make It Work

I realize that exercise and mental stimulation are important for dogs. How can I convince owners that taking their dog for a walk is a good idea?



Generally, people walk their dogs for 4 reasons:

1. Elimination
2. Mental stimulation
3. Exercise
4. Training

Providing exercise and mental stimulation for our pets are necessary and nothing does so better than a good walk (see **Why Walk the Dog?**, page 76). Most of our dog breeds have characteristics designed for a specific purpose that would keep them engaged (eg, sporting dogs, working dogs, herding dogs). However, adult household dogs without the opportunity to pursue that purpose generally do not exercise themselves and, if they have access to a backyard, it usually provides the same scents and sights day after day.

STARTING OFF RIGHT

The time for the “taking a walk” discussion begins with a new puppy. Before taking a puppy for its first walk, it needs to be vaccinated against communicable diseases (see **Resources**, page 77). Once adequately protected, the owner can begin to take the puppy outside the home to other places (eg, walks and puppy classes).

Make sure that the puppy is microchipped and wearing a collar for identification and the handler

CONTINUES

Why Walk the Dog?

Generally, people walk their dog for 4 reasons: elimination, mental stimulation, exercise, and training. Dogs like to go for walks to get outdoors, sniff and engage with their environment, exercise, and perhaps socialize with people and dogs outside the home. There is no reason that a walk cannot encompass and meet all the needs of both humans and dogs. Because time is often at a premium, it is useful to help owners understand and find creative ways to meet these needs.



is using an age appropriate control device, such as a head halter, no-pull harness, or flat collar and leash. Avoid choke collars, pinch collars, and extendible leashes.

Initial walks that teach the puppy to accept the leash should be short so that neither the owner nor the puppy becomes frustrated or tired. This can vary from 5 to 15 minutes, depending on the puppy. Walks can help with early socialization, learning basic control tasks, and allowing exploration and exercise.

Other sources have detailed information on puppy training and socialization; an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this article.¹

FULFILLING EACH DOG'S NEEDS

Most important, a dog needs to eliminate and have access to the appropriate place to eliminate.

In addition, a dog often enjoys the chance to sniff and investigate the environment:

- Some dogs are able to sniff and keep walking; others may want to spend more time investigating and perhaps marking with urine the interesting smells they encounter.
- One study noted that off-leash dogs sniff for longer periods when compared with dogs walking on a leash.² Naturally, the significance is not clear, but perhaps it has to do with the ability to sniff uninterrupted.

The goal of the walk should not necessarily be to create an athlete, but to give sufficient time for exercise and sniffing.

- Giving the dog an opportunity for sniffing and marking during each walk is a good idea. This can be under owner control using commands such as “free dog” when sniffing is allowed and a “heel” command for walking without stopping.

Exercise needs vary from dog to dog and breed to breed:

- The goal of the walk should not necessarily be to create an athlete, but to give sufficient time for exercise and sniffing. A large-breed dog may enjoy running while smaller dogs may be content with slower walks, but exceptions abound. Therefore, walks should be tailored to individual needs.
- If a safe, controlled, open space (ie, fenced yard) is available, games, such as fetch, may be possible and offer great aerobic exercise.
- When planning exercise, accommodations are necessary for age, physical ability, and breed. In dogs prone to lameness, overheating, and cardiac problems, avoid any situation that may exacerbate these issues.

KEEPING HUMANS HAPPY

Being pulled down the street by a dog is undesirable and may discourage owners from walking their dogs. The walk should be on a loose leash with no pressure on either the owner's hand or arm or the dog's neck or chest.

There are several components that facilitate achieving this goal:



Dog Obligation

I came across a new phrase (or at least one that was new to me)—*dog obligation*—while recently researching some facts for a presentation I was giving to a local Rotary Club. This phrase and its connotation were instantly recognizable, as my nearly 13-year-old Jack Russell “terrorist” Buster was sitting near me, expectantly waiting for his evening excursion around

the block. He was making it clear it was time for me to fulfill this nightly obligation.

As I read this article by Dr. Horwitz, I thought of this phrase and reflected on the human side of dog walking. If I did not have Buster, there would be no reason to venture out at 10 pm. Is this good for me? Yes! But, as most of you can relate to

when it comes to exercise, do I look forward to it every night? No. However, there is dog obligation and the obligatory exercise that comes with it. Google the phrase and you will find a number of references in the literature about its benefits.

The tangible medical benefits of pet ownership, such as lower cholesterol, triglycerides, and blood pressure and decreased stress, are well known. The benefits of dog walking for owners and their dogs, however, are less well publicized. Walking dogs has a positive impact on both canine and human obesity and is good for social support and interaction (everybody in the neighborhood knows Buster). Dog owners walk more and longer than nondog owners and this increase has a beneficial effect on the cost of both human and canine health care.

So, while walking is good for the dog as Dr. Horwitz points out in this article, it is good for people too.

Colin Burrows, *Editor in Chief*

Explain to owners that they may have to forego their regular walks while in the training process, but the reward of a well-trained dog will be worth the effort.

- Various products on the market can help improve dog walking. These include head halters, body harnesses, and different types of collars and leashes (see **Resources**).
- Training classes are often useful in teaching pets to walk comfortably on leashes, especially if they focus on positive training, the use of appropriate control devices, and loose leash walking without a strict “heel.”
- One easy technique is to tell owners to stop when the leash is taut and wait until the dog comes back to them a bit and then resume walking. Many dogs will then learn “a loose leash means go forward, taut leash means we stop.”
- Explain to owners that they may have to forego their regular walks while in the training process and spend the time training rather than covering distance, but the reward of a well-trained

dog will be worth the effort.

- Leash walking also helps with controlling the dog, regulates interactions between the pet and people or other dogs, and may help diminish disease transmission on walks.²

When walking for elimination, owners like it to occur promptly and quickly so that the length of the walk can be determined by the time available; not merely waiting for the dog to eliminate.

- Teaching the pet to eliminate on a verbal command will accomplish this goal. The owner can ask for elimination and not begin the walk until it is accomplished. Once the animal eliminates, the walk can commence.
- This also makes it easier for the owner to clean up after the pet and control where elimination takes place.
- Another added benefit to the owner is

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Resources

Vaccination Guidelines

View the 2006 AAHA Canine Vaccine Guidelines, Revised at: aahanet.org/PublicDocuments/VaccineGuidelines06Revised.pdf

Pet Walking Products

Various types of head halters and no-pull and other types of harnesses are produced by the following manufacturers:

- Premier Pet Products: premier.com
- Halti Products: companyofanimals.co.uk
- Canny Collars: cannycollars.us

that if time is short the dog will eliminate promptly, which avoids owner frustration and potentially allows time for a short walk.

OBSTACLES TO SUCCESS

Despite their best efforts, many owners find walking their dog time-consuming or unpleasant. Common complaints include pulling, barking or lunging at other dogs or people, lacking control of the pet, and no time. As mentioned earlier, the appropriate tools can help.

- Set-length leashes offer more control than extending leashes. Head halters and no-pull harnesses can diminish pulling and allow walks to be more controlled.
- Rather than opting for only long walks, adding short sniff walks of 10 to 20 minutes 1 to 3 times a week can make a difference.
- For extreme problems, referral to a good positive reinforcement trainer³ or a veterinary behaviorist may be necessary and may help in selecting appropriate control products.

Tx at a Glance

- Walking dogs encourages exercise and mental stimulation.
- Using proper equipment, such as head halters, no-pull harnesses, and set-length leashes, makes walks more enjoyable.
- Elimination prior to beginning the walk enables flexibility in length of walk.
- Variable-length sniff walks offer variety and interaction with the environment.
- Longer exercise walks, depending on the individual dog, offer physical conditioning.

See Aids & Resources,
back page, for references
& suggested reading.