

Dog walking - the health benefits

Regular exercise with your pet is good for both you and your dog's health and can be great fun. There's nothing like an exercise partner who's waiting by the door with a wagging tail to keep you motivated!

Dog owners enjoy numerous health and social benefits by walking their dog a few times a week. Benefits include improved cardiovascular fitness, lower blood pressure, stronger muscles and bones (built up by walking regularly), and decreased stress.

Your dog will benefit

A regular walk is vitally important for your pet's health too. Obesity in pets is associated with a number of medical complaints including osteoarthritis, cardiovascular disease, liver disease and insulin resistance.

Most dogs need to be walked at least once each day, though some dogs, particularly very active dogs, may require more. The breed of dog you have, as well as its level of fitness and age, will also determine how long and how vigorous your walk should be. A walk can make a dog very happy. They love to check out the sights and smells and will really look forward to spending time with you. A dog that doesn't receive sufficient exercise can easily become bored or destructive.

Health benefits of pet ownership

Research studies from around the world have found that pets may offer health benefits to their owners. Findings from selected studies include:

- People who walk their dogs are seen by other people as friendly and approachable.
- A study of patients waiting in dentist surgeries found that watching fish swim around in an aquarium is as effective at reducing stress as hypnosis.
- Stroking and patting a pet can reduce the physiological indicators of stress, including high blood pressure.
- The non-judgemental companionship and unconditional love offered by pets is known to have considerable mental health benefits for owners, including increased self-esteem.

The community benefits of pets

Research undertaken by the University of Western Australia has found that owning a pet can also benefit the whole community. The researchers found that pet owners, in particular dog owners, were more likely to:

- Acknowledge and greet other people in the street
- Exchange favours with neighbours
- Meet others in their neighbourhood.

Dog walking – your responsibilities

As a dog owner you must supervise your dog at all times and ensure the dog is kept within calling distance and under control. It is in your best interest to provide him with obedience training and socialisation skills necessary to become a well-mannered and socially well-adjusted dog.

As a dog owner you are fully and legally responsible for any harm or damages caused by your dog. You may bear a substantial financial (or legal) penalty if your dog bites a human, kills wildlife, damages property, causes a traffic accident, creates noise or other pollution, or is the direct cause of any other damage to the community. Approximately 1,300 Victorians present at emergency departments each year with dog bite injuries. Children aged under four years are at the highest risk of dog bite, and should be supervised around dogs at all times.

Prepare yourself with warm-ups

Prepare for walking your dog like you would prepare for any exercise, with stretches: in particular, stretches for both front and back legs and stretches of the back and arms. Make sure your equipment (including a dog leash and walking shoes) is suitable and will not cause injury. You and your dog should be protected from excessive heat and sunburn, and have plenty of water for hydration, so make sure you bring some water on a walk.

Choose your dog carefully

If you're not very active, owning a dog could give you a very good reason to walk regularly. But before you rush out and buy a dog, plan your purchase. Make sure you choose a breed that's appropriate to your lifestyle. For example, don't buy a large active dog if you live in a small apartment or have limited mobility.

Dog walking tips

When you walk your dog:

- Aim for 30 minute walks, five times per week.
- Keep your dog on its leash in public areas, unless it's an 'off leash' zone. Contact your local council about areas where dogs can be exercised off leash.
- Supervise your dog around young children.
- Take a plastic bag or scoop to clean up your dog's poo.
- Make sure your dog is properly identified.
- Make sure your dog is desexed.
- Avoid walking in extreme heat.
- Take fresh water for you and your dog to drink.

Environmental considerations

Responsible dog owners respect the environment and the rights of other people. Some things to consider include:

- Most national and state parks and reserves do not allow domestic animals, including dogs (except for guide dogs).
- State forests permit dogs, but only if they are controlled.
- Other parks usually allow dog walking if the animal is leashed.

Where to get help

- The Lost Dogs' Home Tel. (03) 9329 2755
- Your doctor
- Parks Victoria
- Veterinarian

Things to remember

- Always keep your dog under control, and carry plastic bags or scoops so that you can clean up after it.
- Prepare for dog walking like you would prepare for any exercise, with stretches and the right equipment.
- Always supervise dogs around young children.

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