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## Dog walking - the health benefits

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### Summary

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

### The health benefits of dog walking to you and your dog

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.

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, including:

- 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.

### Community health benefits of dog walking and pet ownership

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 – 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 – your responsibilities

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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 your pet with obedience training and socialisation skills necessary to become a well-mannered and socially well-adjusted dog.

### **Prepare yourself for dog walking**

Prepare for walking your dog by:

- stretching before you start - in particular, stretch the front and back of your legs, your back and your arms
- making sure your equipment (including a dog leash and walking shoes) is suitable and will not cause injury
- protecting yourself and your dog from excessive heat and sunburn – make sure you both drink plenty of water before, during and after your walk, walk during the cooler parts of the day when the weather is hot and protect yourself from the sun with a hat, long clothing, sunglasses and sunscreen.

### **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 when dog walking**

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.
- Some local parks and beaches allow dogs to be off the lead – check with your local Council to see where and at what times this is allowed.
- As a dog owner you are fully and legally responsible for any harm or damage to people, property or wildlife caused by your dog.

### **Where to get help**

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

### **Things to remember**

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- Always supervise dogs around young children.

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