

Walking With Your Dog

By Joann M. Locher, M.S.

Walking with your dog has many advantages. It exercises every part of your pet: body, mind and spirit. Walking helps to strengthen the bond between dog and owner, and helps to vent the dog's stress and energy, which might otherwise be used destructively for chewing or digging.

Don't be fooled by your dog's enthusiasm. Very young dogs should not be walked for great distances. The repeated impact on fragile, developing joints may set the stage for later back, hip or leg problems. Older dogs should be checked regularly by a veterinarian to diagnose any developing problems which may be exacerbated by exercise. Overweight dogs should definitely not overdo.

It is safest to face oncoming vehicles and have your dog on your left, away from traffic. Whether you keep your dog in heel position, or let it relax and explore, do not permit the dog to pull you down the street like a wagon. Say "back" and give a quick tug on the leash. If your pet ignores this, make each jerk increasingly sharp until the dog decides that pulling on you is no fun. The walk should improve your relationship, not teach rudeness. Get your dog into the habit of sitting at every curb. It should not proceed across the street without your permission.

Do not try walking your dog off leash. You may think the dog will stay with you, but another animal may suddenly dart across your path, luring your pet into traffic. If you want to give the dog more freedom, there are very long leashes which can extend out for 20 or 30 feet. They retract automatically as the dog runs back to you, to prevent tangling, and include a brake, should your friend decide to bolt.

Exercising on hard surfaces may quickly damage the animal's footpads. They can get cracked, torn, and bleeding before the owner notices. Choose surfaces which reduce the chance of pad damage and jarring of delicate joints, such as grass, dirt, or sand. Pavement surfaces also may get so hot, that they can burn your dog's feet. Plan walks for the cooler times of the day, and when there is less traffic. During these off hours, a reflective collar will make your dog more noticeable in approaching headlights.

Constantly monitor your dog for signs of fatigue, over-heating, or foot damage. If it slows down, pants, or lags, stop for a breather and a small drink of water. When you return from the walk, give water a little at a time.

Clean up after your dog! This is not only considerate, but it is mandated by law in most urban areas. Carry a scooper kit: simply fold a paper towel and a zip-lock plastic bag. When your dog eliminates, turn the bag inside-out on your hand, like a glove. Pick up the pile, turn the bag right-side-out around the mess, and zip closed. You may not need the towel. Deposit in a proper waste receptacle.

Dogs are fast being legislated out of existence. This is because people are getting sick and tired of being the victims of irresponsible dog owners who let their dog's run loose, bark excessively, or leave trails of excrement. There is one town in Connecticut which only allows dogs on their own property! Non-dog people need to be tolerant and understanding. However, the burden of responsibility lies on the dog owner...to enjoy their dogs, and their walks, while not infringing upon the rights of others.