

How Much Exercise Does My Dog Really Need?

First, a hint: A fenced yard doesn't count. Because a tired dog is a good dog - and dogs typically aren't motivated to get the exercise they need - your dog depends on you to get him moving to stay in mental and physical shape. Follow these guidelines and ideas for keeping your dog active.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Most dogs today don't get enough exercise, which is why there are so many overweight, bored canine companions with behavior problems
- A good rule of thumb: Dogs should get a minimum of 20 minutes of sustained heart-thumping exercise a minimum of 3 times a week; most dogs can benefit from longer, more frequent sessions
- There are many ways to help your dog get the physical and mental stimulation she needs — everything from power walks to musical freestyle
- A physically active dog is well-rested dog: well-exercised dogs are better able to maintain a healthy weight, good physical conditioning, and more desirable behavior

Every dog needs exercise, and most don't get anywhere near the amount they need, based on skyrocketing canine obesity rates and a growing epidemic of dogs with difficult-to-manage behaviors such as over excitement, aggression, and destruction of property.

I often remind pet parents that "A tired dog is a good dog," and while this may seem an overly simplistic concept, when you consider the evolution of domesticated canines, it makes perfect sense.

Your dog's ancestors and wild cousins spend all their time hunting their next meal, defending their turf, playing, mating, and caring for litters of pups. Their daily lives are extremely active and social, challenging them both physically and mentally. When you compare the life of a canine in the wild with the one in your home, you get a sense of just how out of condition and bored silly many family dogs are today.

Also remember that dogs can be compared, developmentally speaking, to human toddlers, and there's a reason toddler parents plan their lives around keeping their little ones busy and burning off excess energy. Like the average healthy 3-year-old kiddo, your doggo needs opportunities throughout the day to be physically active and mentally stimulated.

With that said, is it any wonder that dogs left alone for hours are wildly over excited when their human (or any human) comes through the door at the end of the day? Common undesirable behaviors in under-exercised, under-stimulated dogs include:

- Inappropriate chewing

- Rowdiness, jumping up on people
- Destructive scratching, digging
- Inappropriate predatory play
- Dumpster (trash can) diving
- Mouthiness, rough play
- Heightened reactivity, hyperactivity
- Attention-getting behaviors

How Dogs Benefit From the Right Amount of Exercise

There are countless benefits in keeping your canine companion well-exercised, including:

- Keeping his weight in an optimal range
- Reducing or eliminating common boredom-induced behavior problems
- Building confidence and trust in a fearful or shy dog
- Improving his ability to be a calm, balanced individual (remember: “A tired dog is a good dog”)
- Maintaining his musculoskeletal system (skeleton, muscles, cartilage, tendons, ligaments, joints, and other connective tissue) in excellent condition
- Normalizing and regulating his digestive system

How Much Daily Exercise Does My Dog Need?

First of all, it’s really important not to assume that a fenced yard provides all the exercise your dog needs. I’ve had more than my share of owners of obese dogs tell me their pet is getting loads of exercise because they have a big backyard. Studies show that when your dog has no other dogs around and no humans encouraging him to be active, he’ll spend 80% of his time snoozing.

Dogs who have other dogs around for company spend a little less time resting — about 60%. The bottom line: like us, our dogs need reasons to get physically active. Even the biggest, greenest backyard isn’t by itself enough to motivate your dog to get the exercise she needs to stay in good physical and mental (behavioral) condition.

The best and really the only way to make sure she gets moving is to provide her with the companionship and motivation she needs to stay active. If she doesn’t get regular opportunities to run, play and exercise aerobically, even if she’s not overweight, she can end up with arthritis and other debilitating conditions that affect her bones, joints, muscles, and internal organs. Her behavior will suffer as well without regular physical and mental stimulation.

Your dog should be getting an absolute minimum of 20 minutes of sustained heart-thumping exercise 3 times a week. Thirty minutes or an hour is better than 20, and 6 or 7 days a week is better than 3.

Minimum exercise requirements prevent muscle atrophy, but don’t necessarily build muscle mass, strengthen tendons and ligaments, hone balance and proprioception, or enhance cardiovascular fitness, which is why more is always better. If you can provide your dog daily walks as well as additional daily training sessions to meet your other exercise goals (lose weight, build muscle, improve heart function), even better!

Some dog parents believe if they do lots of weekend activities with their pet they can make up for lack of exercise on weekdays. But the problem with this approach is that you can actually create injury to your dog by encouraging him to be a weekends-only athlete.

When a dog's body isn't well conditioned, sudden bursts of activity can cause injuries that lead to long-term joint damage. Consistent daily exercise is a much safer approach and has profound long-term health benefits you don't want your dog to miss.

Ideas for Keeping Your Dog Active

It's important to note that simply strolling with your dog isn't an adequate workout. If walking is your thing, your dog needs sessions of **power walking** — moving at a pace of 4 to 4.5 miles an hour (about a 15-minute mile) to achieve good cardiovascular intensity and caloric burn.

These more intense walks can provide important health benefits not only for your dog, but also for you, including lowering your risk of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and joint disease. First, though, you must reprogram your furry walking partner if he's accustomed to sniff-piddle-dawdle walks. Don't expect to make a one-day transition from leisurely strolls to power walking. It will take several sessions for him to catch on.

Of course, you'll also be taking your dog on casual walks, so you'll need to help him learn to distinguish between the two. It could be a time-of-day thing — for example, you could schedule slower walks for first thing in the morning and again before bedtime, and workout walks in between. Or you could develop a verbal cue that tells your pet it's time for a power walk.

I also highly recommend using a harness when exercising rigorously with your dog. A leash attached to his collar can quickly become a health hazard as you're cruising city streets or even country roads. Many dogs learn which walk they're going on by whether the leash gets attached to their collar (short walk) or a harness (time to break a sweat!).

If you aren't able to move at a power walk pace, consider involving your dog in other types of cardiovascular exercise like swimming, fetch, Frisbee, agility competition, flyball, flying disc, flygility, dock jumping, herding, hunt and field trials, or musical freestyle.

Dogplay is an excellent resource for exploring organized exercise and socialization possibilities for your dog. You might also consider a bike ride alongside your dog using a special bike leash.

It's important to match the type of exercise you choose to your dog's body type (for example, brachycephalic breeds have special considerations), temperament (dog-aggressive dogs have special considerations), and age (older animals or those with permanent physical disabilities have special considerations). The type, duration, and intensity of exercise you choose for your pet will very likely need to be adjusted over time.

Sources and References

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