

The Exercise Mistake Every Dog Owner Makes

While keeping your dog active is key to a healthy lifestyle, there's a common oversight many pet owners make that could be doing more harm than good.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- While most canine family members in the U.S. aren't exercised enough, there are situations in which dogs can get too much of a good thing, for example, an obese pet who is overexercised to speed up weight loss
- Signs your dog is exercising excessively are sore paw pads, sore muscles, and/or sore joints, heat exhaustion, and behavioral changes
- All healthy dogs should get a minimum of 20 minutes of sustained heart-thumping exercise a minimum of 3 times a week; healthy dogs can benefit from longer, more frequent sessions without overdoing it
- There are many ways to help your dog get the physical and mental stimulation she needs — everything from power walks to musical freestyle

While the vast majority of canine companions in the U.S. are under-exercised, there are certain situations in which a pet parent can actually overdo it in the exercise department, for example, in the case of a dog who is **overweight**. Recently, PetMD did a deep dive into the signs of excessive exercise in dogs.¹

5 Signs of Overextension in Dogs

- **Sore paw pads** — As Madison, WI veterinarian Dr. Susan Jeffrey points out, "Some dogs will run until the pads on their feet tear and will then run some more." Injuries to your dog's paw pads can be very painful, making walking difficult or impossible. If he runs and plays hard for long stretches, check the bottom of your dog's paws for tears in the pads, skin pulled away, redness, or thinning. Swelling or pus may indicate an infection.
- **Sore muscles** — Muscle soreness and stiffness often appears when a dog gets moving again after a post-exercise nap. This happens more often with "weekend warrior dogs" who get vigorous exercise only on the weekends. You may notice your dog struggling to stand up, hesitant to go up or down stairs or jump, or whining when moving.
- **Sore joints** — Extreme exercise can result in strains and sprains in a dog's joints, in particular, toe joints, but also wrist and elbow joints. According to Windsor, CO veterinarian Dr. Robin Downing, "Dogs carry about 60% of their weight on their front limbs, which puts quite a bit of stress on those joints. In dogs with very straight rear legs, excessive exercise can lead to problems in the stifle (knee) joints, including strain, sprain, meniscal tears, and tears in the **cranial cruciate ligament**." Dogs that are low to the ground, older dogs with arthritis, and puppies (especially large and giant breeds) have an elevated risk of injury to joints.

- **Heat exhaustion** — Dogs who are exercised during the warmest part of spring and summer days can develop **heat exhaustion or heatstroke**, which can be life-threatening. Flat-faced dogs like Boxers and Frenchies, and very young and older dogs are at highest risk. During the warm months of the year, it's always best to exercise your dog during the coolest part of the day (typically in the early morning or after the sun sets) and provide plenty of fresh drinking water and opportunities to rest.
- **Behavior changes** — According to Milford, DE rehab therapist and veterinary technician Jen Pascucci, inconsistent conditioning can contribute to behavioral changes such as loss of interest in exercise in a formerly very active dog. "Playing off-leash for one hour does not mean [it's] one hour of exercise," she says. "Most dogs will have bursts of activity and then rest when off-leash and left to their own devices. Being free to run and play in the backyard five days a week and then expected to jog with a pet parent 10 miles one day is a recipe for injury." It's a good idea to alternate days of cardio exercise and strengthening with one full day of rest, says Pascucci.

How Dogs Benefit From the Right Amount of Exercise

As I mentioned earlier, dogs in this country who are overexercised are a rarity outside of working breeds and canine athletes. And while it's possible to overdo it, there are certainly 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
- 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?

If you happen to have a fenced yard, it's really important not to assume it 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 and emotional wellbeing will also suffer without regular physical and mental stimulation that's 100% reliant on you.

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.

Achieving those minimum exercise goals will help prevent muscle atrophy but won't build muscle mass, strengthen tendons and ligaments, hone balance and proprioception, or enhance cardiovascular fitness, which is why more is always better, for healthy animals. 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, de-stress), 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 and longevity benefits you don't want your dog to miss (and that don't come in pill form).

Ideas for Keeping Your Dog Active

It's important to note that simply strolling with your dog isn't an adequate workout (but still beneficial for mental wellbeing). 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 (that means no pee stops).

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 "**sniffari**" 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, cardio 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 (sniff 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. When all else fails, hire a dog walker.

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), personality 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

¹ [PetMD, January 24, 2024](#)
