

Makes Your Dog a Sitting Duck for Injury Even Without 'Extreme Sports'

Sets the stage for painful broken legs, slipped discs, and back injuries. Avoid these mistakes, even if (or especially if) your dog thinks he can leap tall buildings in a single bound. They're accident triggers that could severely affect his quality of life. And they're so easy to prevent.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- In a 4-year period, pet parents filed over 180,000 claims for leap-related injuries in dogs
- Most were cuts and bruises, but there were also several back and slipped disc injuries, sprains, and broken bones
- Back injuries, slipped discs, and sprains most often occur in dogs who are not well-conditioned, and can be prevented by insuring your pet receives regular year-round exercise
- Going from very little activity to an intense burst of physical exertion is a recipe for injury. So if your dog has been a couch potato for several weeks or months, start by gradually improving her level of fitness before you let her go full out
- The amount of exercise needed to maintain muscle tone is a minimum of 20 minutes three times weekly. This is the bare minimum, not the optimum

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Does your dog attempt to leap tall buildings in a single bound? Does he leap before he looks? Probably so, if he's like most healthy canines.

Nationwide Insurance, the largest insurer of pets in the U.S., reports that between leap day (February 29) 2012 and leap day 2016, it received over 180,200 claims for leap-related injuries in dogs. The injuries included:

- 107,502 soft tissue trauma injuries, primarily cuts and bruises
- 46,386 back injuries or slipped vertebral discs
- 20,006 sprains
- 6,335 broken legs

Preventing Minor and Major Injuries in a 'Jumper'

On one end of the leap-related injury spectrum are soft tissue trauma injuries, which are often minor. Most active dogs who exercise outdoors get the occasional scrape, cut or bruise. There's not a whole lot you can do to avoid this type of injury while still allowing your dog to be a dog.

However, it's recommended to insure the areas your canine companion runs and plays in are safe, contained, and hazard-free. On the other end of the injury spectrum are broken legs, which are typically not the result of normal or even vigorous or high-intensity exercise.

Bone fractures are generally caused by a sudden impact or great force to the body, for example, being hit by a car or falling a long distance. Broken bones are most often seen in older pets and excitable risk-takers.

The best way to prevent your pet from breaking a leg is to insure she's under your control at all times, especially when outdoors.

Most Leap-Related Injuries Are Seen in Under-Conditioned Dogs

Back injuries, slipped discs and sprains, including CCL injuries, often occur in poorly conditioned dogs. For example, if your pet has been indoors most of the winter, her muscles have lost tone and atrophied (lost size). In fact, studies show that after just a matter of days, well-conditioned muscles begin to lose their tone and strength.

After four or five months of rest during cold weather, your dog's muscles will weaken. This can set the stage for an injury if her activity level suddenly jumps significantly during the first days of spring.

Going from very little activity to an intense burst of physical exertion is a recipe for injury. So if your dog has been a couch potato for several weeks or months, start by gradually improving her level of fitness before you let her go full out.

This applies to dogs who are "weekend warriors," too. Many recurring injuries occur in dogs that exercise and play at high intensity with their owners all weekend, but only on weekends. Monday through Friday, many of these dogs get little to no exercise beyond walking out to the backyard to relieve themselves.

Getting your dog warmed up before he exerts himself is also very important. Walk him and encourage him to stretch his limbs before you engage in more intense exercise. This is especially important for aging dogs.

Many dogs have developed risky habits over many years (jumping in or out of vehicles, leaping up or down several stairs at a time, etc.) that need to be re-patterned to reduce the potential for injury.

Consistency is essential as well. Your dog should get some exercise every day so he remains in good physical condition and his muscles and ligaments stay strong and resilient. This will keep him fit and better able to avoid strains and sprains and other injuries.

The amount of exercise needed to maintain muscle tone is a minimum of 20 minutes three times weekly. This is the bare minimum, not the optimum. And as pets age, the amount of exercise they need increases. Aim for 40 minutes of rigorous walking/running a day.

Avoiding Cervical Disc and Neck Injuries

Cervical disc and neck injuries are often the result of collar strain. Hopefully you've trained (or are training) your dog to walk beside you and heel on her leash. But even the most well-trained dog will have times when she jumps suddenly forward, causing her collar to pull tightly against her neck.

As your dog leaps forward in excitement, she pulls all the slack out of the leash and applies a great deal of pressure via her collar to her neck and cervical area.

This pressure can result in an injury to her cervical disc or other problems with her neck. Symptoms can include a hesitance to move or lower her neck to eat or drink, and painful crying out when her head or neck area is touched. Occasionally there can be lameness in a front leg with this type of injury.

If your dog is a habitual puller and you're not able to improve her behavior on leash — or while you work to improve her leash habits — switch to a harness, Gentle Leader-type head collar, or another type of restraint. These alternate devices distribute your dog's body weight evenly across the restraint and alleviate the pressure on her neck.

The Importance of Regular Exercise in Preventing Leap-Related Injuries

If your four-legged companion's leg muscles aren't toned, his tendons and ligaments aren't stretched and strong, and his core muscles haven't been worked and can't do a good job holding his frame solidly in place, a sudden burst of activity even at home can create the type of injuries discussed above.

Your canine companion needs your help to maintain good skeletal health through daily, consistent, controlled aerobic exercise, including such activities as walking, hiking, jogging with you, swimming, fetching a ball, or catching a Frisbee.

Depending on where you live, it's much easier to keep your dog fit during spring and summer months, but your goal should be to keep him exercised year round. If you live where winters discourage outdoor activities, you'll need to use some creativity to come up with ways to help your dog stay active. Some ideas to consider:

- A hydrotherapy or warm water dog pool
- Indoor agility, tracking training, or **nose work**
- An indoor dog park (this is also a great idea if you live in a climate where the summers are too hot for strenuous outdoor exercise)
- Cross-country skiing

Sources and References

[Portland Press Herald March 2, 2016](#)
