

This Is One of the Worst Reasons to Get a Dog

It may seem like a totally logical reason to get one. And you'll find plenty of research to back it up. But when you see this 'compelling reason,' you'll see that it's a bad reason and can quickly backfire. Find out why.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A report from Harvard Medical School, Get Healthy, Get a Dog: The health benefits of canine companionship addresses the physical, mental, and emotional benefits we derive from our relationships with dogs
- Several studies suggest people who regularly walk their dog are in better physical shape than people who walk with other people
- Dogs, as natural athletes, derive tremendous benefits from exercising with their humans, and going on a variety of different walks with them
- All healthy relationships require give-and-take, so it's important that dogs also benefit from the bond they share with their humans
- It's important not to get a dog solely to achieve your fitness needs. Adopt a dog because you want to share your life with a canine companion, not because you need more exercise

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If you're a dedicated dog person, you can't imagine life without a canine companion (or two ... or a pack). Those of us who share our hearts and homes with a dog are keenly aware of the emotional, physical, and spiritual benefits of our relationship with our furry best friend.

Unfortunately, not everyone understands the human-canine bond. You've probably learned which people in your life "get it" when you express love for your dog, and which don't.

If you have close friends or family members who are firmly in the "it's just a dog" camp, you may have made a conscious decision not to share "doggy stuff" with them.

If you've ever had someone important to you challenge or disapprove of your relationship with your pet, a new report from Harvard Medical School (HMS) titled Get Healthy, Get a Dog: The health benefits of canine companionship may be worth sharing with them.

The Many Ways Dogs Enrich Our Lives

The Get Healthy, Get a Dog report is the first of its kind to collect hundreds of studies from around the globe that address the physical, mental, and emotional benefits humans derive from their relationships with dogs. Twig Mowatt, writing for The Bark, explains:

*"Taken together, these studies provide the most complete picture yet of the many ways in which dogs enrich human life: from lower cholesterol and improved cardiovascular health to weight loss, companionship, defense against depression and longer lifespans."*¹

Dog guardianship not only encourages people to be more active (dogs need to be walked, after all), but according to the report it also:²

- Helps us be calmer, more mindful, and more present in our lives
- Makes children more active, confident, and responsible
- Enriches the lives of older folks
- Makes people feel more social and less isolated

Of course, all healthy relationships require give-and-take, so it's important that dogs also benefit from the bond they share with their humans.

Walking Your Dog Offers Significant Health Benefits

A study conducted by Michigan State University (MSU) a few years ago reported that over half of regular dog walkers are considered "moderate" or "vigorous" exercisers according to federal criteria.³

The researchers also reported that dog walkers are more active overall than people without dogs. About half of all dog walkers get an average of 30 minutes of exercise at least 5 days a week. Among non-dog owners, only a third got that much exercise.

One of the goals of the MSU study was to determine whether dog walking adds to the amount of exercise people get or whether it replaces other types of physical activity.

According to researchers, dog walkers had higher overall levels of moderate and vigorous physical activity than other study participants, and spent more of their leisure time in energetic pursuits like sports and gardening.

On average, dog owners who regularly walked their pets exercised about 30 minutes more per week than people without dogs.

How Your Dog Benefits from Exercising with You

Physical exercise helps keep your canine companion's heart, lungs, joints, and digestive and circulatory systems in good working order. It also helps him stay trim and burn off energy.

It's really no joke that "a tired dog is a good dog." Under-exercised, **bored dogs** are prime candidates for developing undesirable habits and behaviors, as well as anxiety. One way to help your four-legged family member get moving is to take her on a variety of different types of walks:

- There are purposeful walks that are typically short, for example, when you take your dog out to her potty spot.
- There are mentally stimulating walks during which you allow your dog to stop, sniff, investigate, mark a spot, and so forth. Dogs accumulate knowledge about the world through their noses.

Most leashed dogs don't get to spend as much time sniffing and investigating as they would like, so allowing your pet some time to explore is good mental stimulation for him.

- There are power walks that keep your dog's frame strong, his weight in check, and help alleviate arthritis and other degenerative joint diseases.

Exercise consistency is key. Your dog needs to exercise every three days at a minimum to maintain muscle tone and prevent muscle wasting. It's also important to elevate your pet's heart rate for 20 minutes during exercise.

If your dog is out of shape, you'll need to start slow and build gradually to 20 minutes per session.

- There are training walks that can be about improving leash manners, learning basic or advanced obedience commands, ongoing socialization, or anything else you can think of that can be done on a leashed walk.

Ongoing training throughout your dog's life is a great way to keep his faculties sharp and boredom at bay. It's also a wonderful way to strengthen the bond between you and your pet.

A Dog Can Be Great for Your Health, But Don't Get One for That Reason

It's wonderful that dog owners who regularly walk their pets get improved fitness in the deal. That means both the dog and his owner are getting good exercise, which is certainly something we need to focus on in light of the **obesity epidemic** in both people and pets in the U.S.

However, the notion that people should get dogs instead of gym memberships or a treadmill can be uncomfortable. After all, plenty of gym memberships get cancelled within a few months, and the majority of treadmills end up shoved into a corner of the bedroom and used as expensive clothes hangers.

Adopting a dog purely to meet the exercise needs of a human is a really bad idea. Owning a dog is a privilege and a significant responsibility. It's a commitment to care for an animal for all the years of her life.

To get in shape, join the gym. Or buy that treadmill. **Adopt a dog** because you want to share your life with a canine companion ... not because you need more exercise.

Sources and References

[VetStreet January 21, 2015](#)

¹ [The Bark \(Archived\)](#)

² [Harvard Health Publications \(Archived\)](#)

³ [J Phys Act Health. 2011 Mar;8\(3\):436-44](#)