

Winter Couch Potato

Q *I don't want my dog to pack on the pounds during the cold winter months by becoming a couch-lounging canine. What are some safe outdoor activities we can do together as well as a few we can do indoors when the weather is nasty?*

● Arden Moore ● Steve Brooks

EVEN IF OLD MAN WINTER DUMPS snow or drops the temperature below 32 degrees where you live, keeping your dog Fido fit should be a year-round commitment.

I applaud you for not wanting to turn your dog into a couch loungeur during inclement weather. If your dog eats the same amount of food in cold months when he is not exercising as much as he does during warmer months, he is at risk for packing on the pounds. And excess pounds will not only turn your dog's wiggle into a waddle, but it can also make your dog more prone to diabetes, heart disease, joint pain and other conditions associated with being overweight or worse, obese.

DURING NASTY WEATHER, STAY INSIDE AND:

- Set up a mini-obstacle course using paper plates or kitchen chairs in a large open space like a living room or basement. Put your dog on a short lead and have him weave in and out of the line of paper plates or chairs. Or simply have him perform figure-8s in and out of your legs a few times.
- Add aerobics by having your dog go up and down stairs or race back and forth in a long hallway. Provide heaps of praise and occasionally, dole out a healthy treat to motivate him.
- Mix up basic obedience cues. Instead of having your dog perform a sit and then a down, put them together and have him perform “puppy pushups”—a succession of quick sit-downs.

AFTER A SNOW FALL, HEAD OUTDOORS AND:

- Play snow ball fetch. Dogs, just like us, can get a little stir crazy inside during the winter. Make a batch of snowballs in your backyard or enclosed area and encourage your dog to try to chase and catch the snowballs you hurl.
- Shorten your walks during very cold days. Your dog still gets to be outdoors for a dose of Vitamin D, but is not over exerting himself.
- Create a canine scavenger hunt. In a safe area, stash a few of your dog's favorite colored balls or toys behind trees and other objects. Then have your dog (leashed or unleashed, depending on the safety) go on a search mission to find the items. This activity works his brain and his muscles.

These indoor/outdoor workouts provide an added benefit: playing with your dog is great way to bond. So, let it snow! 🐾

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SITTING ON THE SOFA WITH YOUR pooch may be a great way to bond (and lower your blood pressure) but so is exercising with your dog, which provides an ideal opportunity to bond with your pet while both of you enjoy the benefits!

If you're heading outdoors in cold temps, dress your canine companion in a coat and booties to keep them warm and protect paws from toxic ice-melting agents on slippery sidewalks (but don't leave booties on for long periods).

If it's too cold for you, it's too cold for your dog.

Northern breeds like Huskies with heavy coats fare better in nasty weather than a skinny Italian greyhound. To learn how cold is too cold for your dog; refer to Tufts Animal Care and Condition (TACC) scale.

Taking into account weather conditions and the age, size, and fitness level of your dog, some of my favorite outdoor exercises include: agility, Frisbee, Skijoring (dog sled on skis), herding, jogging, Schutzhund (protection sport), Treibball (herding sport), tug-of-war, and three-paced walk.

• **THREE-PACED WALK:** You & your K9 walk 30 seconds; jog, sprint, and repeat.

Benefits: Aerobic conditioning, burns calories, increases cardiovascular function.

BROOKS TIP: It helps if your dog knows how to heel and walk properly.

• **TUG-OF-WAR:** Using a knotted rope, pull one end while your dog bites the other.

Benefits: Strengthens jaw and upper body; expends energy, burns calories.

Brooks Tip: Train to “drop it” and not miss the toy and bite your fingers.

What about when the weather keeps you and your doggie indoors? Try “downward dog” with Doga or how about dancing, hide & seek, sniffing and searching games like nose work? Even advanced tricks like piano playing can burn calories. I get great results with doggie push-ups or interactive games that are mentally and physically beneficial.

• **DOGGIE PUSH UPS:** Say “sit”, then say ‘down’. Repeat for 4-5 reps. Ask for a “stay” and let your dog take a break while you do yours or try doing them together!

Benefits: Improves flexibility while reinforcing a foundation of training.

Brooks Tip: Teach your dog sit and down first. Praise or treat when they get it right!

• **INTERACTIVE GAMES:** Using a puzzle game or treat ball, put a tasty morsel inside and have your pup chase, push or bat it around with their nose.

Benefits: Mental stimulation, physical interaction, and fun for owner and pets!

Brooks Tip: This also engages their natural inclination to hunt for prey.

It's up to you, not your dog, to make sure they walk, exercise, and play to keep their bodies fit—even in the winter months! 🐾