

Yum! Journal

BY ANDREA TRAVIS

Leash Lessons

Head out with your dog for a win-win walk.

BY KAREN ASP



If you felt stir-crazy or bored during your day at work, imagine how your dog must feel. Most likely you both could benefit from a little fresh air and exercise. "Walking helps keep a dog's brain agile by giving your pet mental stimulation," says Steve Brooks, Los Angeles-based certified professional dog trainer, canine behavioral expert, and author of *Dog Bites with Steve Brooks* (Dog Ear Publishing; 2014). The novelty of a new route on a walk or learning a new trick can recharge an older dog's brain cells and make a young pup even happier.

Regular walks also help your dog maintain or shed weight. Roughly 53 percent of dogs are overweight, according to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention. "Those excess pounds can cause health issues like high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, cancer, and heart disease," says Jeff Werber, DVM and Emmy-award-winning celebrity veterinarian in Los Angeles.

The bonus? You might slim down, too. When people walked their dog five times a week for 20 minutes at a time, they lost 14 pounds on average over 50 weeks, according to studies from the

University of Missouri Research Center for Human Animal Interaction (ReCHAI) in Columbia, Missouri.

The key to a successful dog walk is to make sure you're walking your dog, not the other way around. This takes planning and work. Think of your walk as a training ground to teach or reinforce behaviors that will allow you and your pet to spend quality time together. Check out our dog-walking tips and advice from experts.

In a review of nine studies of dog owners, those who walk their dogs were at least two times more likely than others to meet the moderate level of physical activity (150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity per week) set by the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans.

1. ACQUIRE THE ESSENTIALS. You'll need a dog collar, disposable waste bags, and a 4- to 6-foot leash. "Avoid retractable leashes and choke or pinch collars, as they can cause injury," says Carol Osborne, DVM, veterinarian and founder and director of the Chagrin Falls Veterinary Center and Pet Clinic in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. She recommends a head halter or walking harness for dogs that pull, neither of which will compromise your dog's airway. Another helpful item is a hip pouch for stashing bags, small toys, treats, water, and a collapsible bowl.

2. PREP YOUR PUP. "You want your dog to be your partner on your walk, which means interacting and having occasional eye contact with you," Brooks says, adding that you also need to devote your attention to your dog. Practice walking your dog in the driveway, the backyard, or even your kitchen. Whenever your dog finds your side, reward the behavior. Using a slack leash, begin walking a few steps at a time with your dog at your side; stop every three steps or so, and reward if your dog stays next to you, using a small treat. Eventually work up to

Tip: Increase the Fun Factor. While dogs love to walk routinely, they benefit from varying the path. A change of scenery will stimulate your dog, Doug Simon says. Also consider setting up a midwalk playdate. Arrange to meet a canine friend at a specified place during your walk, which will help socialize your dog. Or opt for an off-leash visit to a dog park, which also encourages interaction.

longer distances before rewarding. If your dog starts pulling, one method is to stop but don't react, Brooks says. Stay still with your arms close to your body. When your dog stops pulling, lure your dog back to your side, reward, and start walking.

3. SOCIALIZE SENSIBLY. Once you progress to less controlled environments, other dogs and people pose the biggest obstacles. These can be great opportunities for socializing your dog, as long as all parties are game. First, check the body language of all people and dogs approaching you. If you see a person start to tense or move away from you, hug the side of the road that allows you to put your body between your dog and the person. Although all dogs are different, in general if you see a dog with an unnaturally high tail and ears forward or tail tucked and ears back, this dog may not want to interact with your dog, Brooks says. Observe the other dog's equipment; if you see a pinch collar or retractable leash, that could be a sign the owner doesn't have control of the dog and the dog may be on edge. Worst case? Cross to the opposite side of the

road using as much excitement as you can so your dog doesn't interpret your change in direction as anxiety or fear. If you don't sense any aggression issues between the dogs, let them have a three-second sniff, then move on. That's enough time for the dogs to get each other's full résumé.

4. KEEP ON TRACK. Dogs generally need at least two 20-minute exercise sessions a day, Werber says. Tailor any exercise program to your dog's age, breed, weight, and physical condition. Before you start a walking program, confirm with your vet that walking is OK for your dog, especially if your dog has a medical condition, Osborne says. Then progress gradually, perhaps starting with 10-minute walks three times a week and then increasing to 20 minutes, even adding another day, until you're eventually walking at least 30 minutes daily five days a week, says Rebecca Johnson, Ph.D., RN, professor and director of ReCHAI and co-author of *Walk a Hound, Lose a Pound* (Purdue University Press; 2011).

5. MOVE IT ALONG. Opt for a brisk pace, which will elevate heart rate in you and your dog, a necessity for building aerobic fitness, Osborne says. Remember that dogs need to enjoy

the walk, too, so let them take an occasional sniff, which can serve as a reward, Brooks says. For instance, ask your dog to walk 10 houses at your side, and if that's successful, allow sniffing for the next five houses. You can also redirect your dog's attention, especially when other dogs and people are approaching, with toys and treats. "Mix it up to keep your dog guessing," Brooks says, which will reiterate that you're more exciting than anything else.

6. BE AWARE OF THE WEATHER. A main concern is heat stroke, a potentially deadly condition with symptoms that include excessive panting and drooling, weakness, anxiousness, abnormal gum color, and collapse. Hot sidewalks can also cause dogs' paws to blister. A good guideline: "What's too hot for you is too hot for your dog," Werber says, adding that you can always play inside if needed. To beat the heat, walk early in the morning or later in the evening. Bring water and stop in shaded areas, especially if your dog's slowing or pulling on the leash, coughing, panting, wheezing, or foaming at the mouth. Consider soaking a bandana in water, shaping it into a collar, and freezing it overnight, then tie it around your dog's neck before walking. ■

HOW TO HIRE A DOG WALKER

When you can't get out to walk your dog, hire a pinch hitter. Expect to pay a dog walker about \$12 to \$20 per walk, depending on where you live, says Doug Simon, founder of Walk the Dog in Chicago and Pet Check Technology, a company that provides GPS tracking for dog walkers. He suggests: **ASK AROUND.** Tap friends, family, and your vet for suggestions. Also, look for online reviews about the

person or company, and ask potential walkers if you can chat with current clients.

REQUIRE INSURANCE AND BONDING. All dog walkers should be bonded and insured in case of accident, injury, or theft.

TRY ACCOUNTABILITY TRACKING. Instead of relying on the walker's word about when she showed up to exercise your dog or how long the walk lasted, ask if the walker uses or

is willing to use accountability software such as Pet Check Technology

(petchecktechnology.com). With this type of software, you can get real-time e-mails when the walker arrives and leaves, GPS tracking during the walk, and photos and comments from the walker.

MEET THE WALKER: Get a better feel for the walker by arranging a face-to-face meeting, and bring your pet.