

## Dog walking – the health benefits

Almost 40 per cent of Australian households own a dog. There are 3.1 million pet dogs in Australia. Simply walking their dog a few times a week could offer owners numerous health and social benefits. Benefits include improved cardiovascular fitness, lower blood pressure, stronger muscles and bones (built up by walking regularly), and decreased stress.

A study undertaken in New South Wales found that 41 per cent of dog owners walk, on average, 18 minutes per week longer than people without dogs. However, the majority of dog owners (59 per cent) don't walk their dogs at all, and do less physical activity than people without dogs.

Walking is also important for the dog's health. Obesity in pets is associated with a number of medical complaints including osteoarthritis, cardiovascular disease, liver disease and insulin resistance.

### Health benefits of pet ownership

Research studies from around the world have found that pets may offer health benefits to their owners. Findings from selected studies include:

- People who walk their dogs are seen by other people as friendly and approachable.
- A study of patients waiting in dentist surgeries found that watching fish swim around in an aquarium is as effective at reducing stress as hypnosis.
- Stroking and patting a pet can reduce the physiological indicators of stress, including high blood pressure.
- The non-judgemental companionship and unconditional love offered by pets is known to have considerable mental health benefits for owners, including increased self-esteem.

### The community benefits of pets

Research undertaken by the University of Western Australia has found that owning a pet can also benefit the whole community. The researchers found that pet owners, in particular dog owners, were more likely to:

- Acknowledge and greet other people in the street
- Exchange favours with neighbours
- Meet others in their neighbourhood.

### Dog walking – the risks

Like all exercise dog walking can carry some risks, especially for older people. Injuries can include falls in the home and outside, and dog bites.

Approximately 1,300 Victorians present at emergency departments each year with dog bite injuries. Children aged under four years are at the highest risk of dog bite, and should be supervised around dogs at all times. More children in Victoria aged between one and four years are hospitalised for dog bites than car accidents.

### Prepare yourself with warm-ups

Prepare for walking your dog like you would prepare for any exercise, with stretches: in particular, stretches for both front and back legs and stretches of the back and arms. Make sure your equipment (including a dog leash and walking shoes) is suitable and will not cause injury. You and your dog should be protected from excessive heat and sunburn, and have plenty of water for hydration, so make sure you bring some water on a walk.

### Choose your dog carefully

If you're not very active, owning a dog could give you a very good reason to walk regularly. But before you rush out and buy a dog, plan your purchase. Make sure you choose a breed that's appropriate to your lifestyle. For example, don't buy a large active dog if you live in a small apartment or have limited mobility.

### Dog walking tips

When you walk your dog:

- Aim for 30 minute walks, five times per week.
- Keep your dog on its leash in public areas, unless it's an 'off leash' zone. Contact your local council about areas where dogs can be exercised off leash.
- Supervise your dog around young children.
- Take a plastic bag or scoop to clean up your dog's poo.
- Make sure your dog is properly identified.
- Make sure your dog is desexed.
- Avoid walking in extreme heat.
- Take fresh water for you and your dog to drink.

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## Environmental considerations

Responsible dog owners respect the environment and the rights of other people. Some things to consider include:

- Most national and state parks and reserves do not allow domestic animals, including dogs (except for guide dogs).
- State forests permit dogs, but only if they are controlled.
- Other parks usually allow dog walking if the animal is leashed.

## Where to get help

- The Lost Dogs' Home Tel. (03) 9329 2755
- Your doctor
- Parks Victoria
- Veterinarian.

## Things to remember

- Always keep your dog under control, and carry plastic bags or scoops so that you can clean up after it.
- Prepare for dog walking like you would prepare for any exercise, with stretches and the right equipment.
- Always supervise dogs around young children.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by, Kinect Australia (inc VICFIT in Victoria). The Better Health Channel is part of the Department of Human Services, Victoria.

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