



# FITNESS IN YOUR BACK YARD

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## Exercise has benefits for dogs too! Some simple ideas for keeping your couch potato in reasonable shape.

By Suzanne Clothier

Canine athlete. Do those two words make you think of dogs that can perform amazing feats? While it's fun to watch highly trained canine athletes take dogs sports to the extreme, your own dog hardly qualifies as a canine athlete. Or does he?

The *Canine Sports Medicine Association* newsletter (April, 1997) puts canine athletes in four categories: "elite, amateur, professional and recreational." Unless you're headed for competition, chances are your dog is a recreational athlete and keeping him reasonably fit doesn't require expensive equipment or membership in a doggy gym. With your coaching, your dog can walk, jump and play his way into better shape. First stop? Your veterinarian's office for a complete physical and a discussion about appropriate exercise levels.

"All dogs benefit from exercise, but the trick is to find the right exercise program for each dog," cautions chiropractic veterinarian Sue Ann Lesser DVM. With a roving practice that covers five states, the South Huntington NY based doctor spends her days helping concerned owners keep their dogs in great shape. "Every dog is different. Daily walks might be perfect for one dog, but another dog could need more intense workouts. You need to think about the individual dog."

Age, breed and personality along with health problems, such as hip dysplasia, obesity, arthritis, even some medications can affect your dog's exercise tolerance. Physical characteristics such as short muzzles or heavy coats may also need special consideration. Although exercise helps shed unwanted pounds, ask your veterinarian for ways to safely reduce your dog's caloric intake. New Hampshire veterinarian Dr. Geoffrey Clark reminds owners that "An overweight dog will need a transition period while it loses weight and regains fitness, so take it easy at the outset."

Is your dog closer to champion couch potato than award winning athlete? No need to despair, says dog lover Karen Koenig of Woodbine, Maryland. "My oldest American Eskimo, 'Mama Dog' was putting on weight and she had stopped being a part of the family. I began a regular exercise program developed for me by a trainer who specializes in this. We do daily stretches and walks, and have reached a point where 'Mama Dog' is actually running again. It's been great fun watching her re-emerge."

Dr. Clark, who is also the editor of *Canine Sports Medicine Update*, is an advocate of a varied exercise program. "Varying the training routine with different activities will make things more interesting for both you and your dog. This form of 'canine cross training' can include a combination of walking, running, swimming and retrieving."

Walking is great exercise for you and your dog, requires no

fancy equipment and can be done anywhere, anytime. Brisk is the key word to fitness walking. Allow your dog some sniffing time, and then start moving! A mature dog in good shape should be able to keep up with you easily. With puppies, older dogs, and dogs who are overweight or who have physical problems, you'll need to be cautious. For all dogs, stay alert for the first clue of tiring: a change in speed or the rhythm of the dog's gait. He may even feel a bit heavy on the lead. Immediately slow down and head for home to avoid overdoing it.

Keep track of how far you've walked - measure by blocks or with your car's speedometer. If your dog has shown signs of tiring, do about 1/3 less on your next walk. Your goal is a dog who can comfortably make the round trip at a brisk walk with no signs of tiring. Increase distances very gradually as your dog becomes more fit. Decrease distances if your dog's age or physical problems begin to affect him more.

While your dog may already jump for joy, you can encourage him to jump for fitness. While jumping strengthens both back and belly muscles, it can be damaging to young bones (under a year old) and too much for dogs with physical problems. You can create jumps from anything that will break away or give if the dog makes a mistake: cardboard boxes (try tissue boxes or milk cartons for little guys), a broomstick balanced on coffee cans, or even open brown paper bags. Be sure to set up the jumps on good footing.

For basic toning, use a row of three jumps set no higher than the dog's elbow (higher jumps require special training and conditioning). With the dog off-leash, call him over the jumps to you. Never jump a dog on leash - you can throw off his balance and hurt him. Begin with 2 runs down the row, and gradually over 6-8 weeks increase to maximum of 10 runs down the row. Stop if your dog hits the jumps or refuses - it's his way of telling you his muscles are tired. And no matter how fit he is, three times a week is enough jumping for any dog.

"When I brought home a younger dog, I suddenly realized my husky mix Logan was moving like an old man," says Lynn Sipe of Severna Park, MD. "I knew exercise was important for human senior citizens, so I wanted exercises that could help Logan stay healthy and active." With help from trainers Debbie Hutchinson & Terry Wright of Pasadena MD, Lynn began a program of regular exercise that included low jumps to tone Logan's muscles. "Logan is now a very vigorous old fellow who definitely enjoys his exercises, especially his jumps," states Sipe. "And his veterinarian is delighted with Logan's continued suppleness and flexibility."

For dogs who like to retrieve, a game of fetch is healthy fun. You can add intensity to the workout in several ways. Use rope handled balls or bumpers, or put an old tennis racket

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to work to send the toy as far as possible. Build excitement and speed by throwing the toy but holding the dog back for 10-30 seconds before letting him fly after it. If there's a moderate slope available, send the dog uphill for the retrieve. For dogs who prefer treats to retrieving, apply the same techniques to making the dog work hard for a low calorie treat.

Your job as a coach is to protect your dog. He does not understand the long term effects of overdoing it or recognize the possibility of injury. Dr. Clark points out that "it's much easier to prevent an injury than it is to rehabilitate a dog following an injury." Be sure he gets proper warm ups (5-10 minutes of brisk walking) and cool downs (another 5-10 minutes of quiet walking), some stretches and even massage after a big workout. Whatever the activity, watch for signs that he's tiring, and switch to something less demanding, give him a rest or stop altogether.

Never assume that a dog is fit for one exercise because he's conditioned for another. Muscles become accustomed only to regular activities. Your dog may be an old hand at swimming but that doesn't mean he's prepared for hiking in the mountains. Adding something new? Dr. Clark cautions, "It's important to begin new activities at a moderate level and increase gradually. The risk of serious injury to your dog during strenuous activity can be diminished by entering into a training program at a reasonable pace."

A dog's enthusiasm for an activity does not equal fitness. Even though he may want to continue, you may have to set safe limits for him. Commit to regular exercise throughout the week to avoid the dreaded "weekend warrior" syndrome (active mostly on weekends and prone to injury.)

For those struggling with canine behavior problems, it's good to remember that exercise (along with training, proper nutrition and clear leadership) goes a long way to help resolve these problems. A tired dog is almost always a good dog!

"Sometimes, I can't remember which class I'm teaching - dogs or people?" laughs Linda Caplan, a busy dog trainer and aerobics instructor. "When I'm talking about exercise, it doesn't matter. Dogs get the same benefits we do - reduced stress levels and weight control. Exercise also gives the dog something to do which is not only fun, but good for them."

The Essex, Vermont trainer spends much of her time helping people sort out canine behavior problems. "In the initial interview, I always ask how much regular exercise the dog gets. Usually, the answer is 'not much.' It's amazing how many behavior problems can be helped by giving the dog a half-hour to an hour of serious exercise every day."

Exercise can also give both the dog and owner a positive outcome, says Caplan. "One of my clients had an 8 month old puppy who wasn't getting enough exercise. The pup spent a lot of the evening racing around the house, grabbing things and generally ruining their quiet family time. Together, we created an exercise program that fit the owner's busy schedule but gave the pup what he needed."

Caplan laughs about the client's report a week later, "She told me about her wonderful, tired puppy who was now a happy part of quiet family time. That's the magic of regular exercise. When you think how many dogs are killed in shelters because of behavior problems, I wish more people knew that tired dogs are not only happy dogs, they're good dogs."

Just how much exercise is enough? A quick and easy way to evaluate whether your dog has gotten enough exercise (or not!) is to take the TV test: Settle down to watch your favorite show. Is your dog stretched out dead asleep beside you or quietly chewing on a toy or bone? If so, he's probably had enough exercise that day. If you have to struggle to see the TV over a dog who's standing in front of the set with a toy in his mouth and a hopeful look on his face, he hasn't had enough exercise.

The benefits of regular exercise can carry over well into the golden years. "I'd swim Daisy every day in the summer, and we had long daily walks followed by stretches the rest of the year," remembers Nancy Beach, a Labrador lover from Danbury, CT. "A regular fitness program helped keep her weight down and her joints limber despite several bouts of Lyme disease. Daisy literally bounced into old age - still active at age 14!"

A fitness program for your dog is part of responsible ownership, and can help keep your dog feeling and looking his best. Love and attention keep the gleam in your dog's eye. Good nutrition and grooming keep the shine in his coat. And your careful attention to his exercise needs can help keep the spring in his step.