



**Talking the Walk**

**By**

**Karen Harrison**

**Owner, Joy of Living**

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Do you take your dog for regular walks? The reason I ask is that 44% of dogs today are overweight. The primary causes of obesity in dogs are lack of exercise and overeating. With the ever increasing pace of pet owner's lives, many find it difficult to schedule regular activity for themselves and their pet.

Like overweight humans, overweight dogs suffer more physical ailments and do not live as long as animals of recommend weight. Obesity also reduces a pet's enjoyment of life and leads to a higher risk of arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer and behavioral problems.

Exercise also reduces stress in dogs. It gives your dog a chance to simply be a dog. Dogs like to experience the sights, sounds and smells of their environment. Regular walks help socialize your dog, allowing him to bond with other dogs in the neighborhood. This boosts your dog's confidence with humans and other pets and keeps him healthy along the way.

Before starting a new walking schedule, consider you and your pet's current physical condition. Starting with short periods of activity and then gradually increasing the time, speed, and distance is a good rule of thumb for both dogs and humans.

A regular walking routine for your dog benefits not only him but you as well.

### **Benefits for Pets and Their People**

Research has shown that people who walk with their pets get more benefit from walking than those walking with a human companion.

The Research Center on Human Animal Interaction at University of Missouri conducted a study with a group of adults 54 and older living in an assisted living home. Some chose to walk with a friend, while others took a bus to an animal shelter where they were paired with a dog.

The dog-walkers increased their walking speed by 28 %, the human teams speed increased by only 4%. In addition, the dog-walking group missed fewer walks and seemed more eager to walk each day.

People that walk their pet on a regular basis also tend to lose weight and become more fit overall. Moods can also be better due to being outside and getting higher doses of vitamin D naturally.

Once you decide to start a regular walking schedule with your dog, there is some planning to do so walks will be as beneficial as possible for both of you.

## **Gearing Up With the Right Collar**

The right collar and leash are very important aspects of the walk experience for you and your dog. The best gear for your dog often depends on the breed. There are many types of collars and leashes on the market, how do you know where to begin?

*Flat collars* work well on large-breed (Labrador Retriever, for example), healthy, well-behaved dogs. If your dog pulls often and has trouble breathing while on leash, this is indication a change is needed.

If your dog has a habit of pulling while on leash, a *head collar*, often called a “gentle leader” would be a good option. This style clips below the snout and when light force is applied, the dog’s head will turn. This is best used for dogs that pull or have a history of aggression or anxiety.

The *Martingale* is best for dogs whose head and neck are about the same size (greyhounds are one example), and as a result can slip easily out of standard collars. When tension is applied, the collar fits snugly around the dog’s neck. Martingales should not be worn continually, since they have a slack fit when no pressure is applied and could cause your dog to get caught on objects and injure himself.

The *body harness, back-clip* offers a good option for small breed dogs that could easily sustain tracheal injury if a correction is applied using standard flat collars. This is also a good choice for dogs with previous back or neck injuries.

A *body harness, front-clip* is another good option for small breed dogs. This harness also works for dogs that have a tendency to pull while on leash. This style clips at the dog’s chest, so when he uses his weight to pull forward, he is turned toward you. No longer leading the way, this can work as a deterrent to pulling.

*Slip collars*, or choke chains can be an effective training tool, but caution must be taken to use them correctly. Be sure the slack of the chain comes through the hoop around the dog’s neck toward you, depending on what side you stand on during the walk. Always remove these collars after the walk, like the Martingale discussed above, the slack in the chain can cause your dog to get caught on objects and injure himself.

A few months ago, one of my clients was nearly injured due to a loose chain collar. Dillon’s chain collar was starting to fit more loosely due to some much-needed weight loss. We’d just returned from our walk and I left him alone for a moment. I came back a few minutes later and noticed he wasn’t walking normally. When I checked him out further, I saw that he’d gotten his paw caught in the collar and couldn’t get it out!

## **Never Leave Home Without It-The Right Leash**

To ensure your walks are enjoyable and safe for you and your dog means choosing the right leash for him. Many pet owners do not understand the importance of the right leash for their

dog. If the wrong leash is used, it can lead to problems for children or adults not physically strong enough to walk a large dog that may have occasion to pull. Serious injury to the pet owner and pet may result.

The two most common types of leashes are *nylon or cotton* and *extendable*. The nylon or cotton leashes come in a variety of lengths and widths, depending on the size of dog. It is important to have the right length, if the leash is too short it will be too tight and tense and cause your dog to pull. I recommend a 6-foot length for walking in most public areas. The 1-inch wide, 6-foot length works well for large breeds such as Boxers or Golden Retrievers, since you can hold the leash with both hands in the event your dog starts to pull.

*Extendable* leashes, sometimes referred to as retractable leashes, allow your dog more room to roam during the walk. They come in a variety of sizes depending on dog's weight. Although these leashes allow your pet more freedom to explore, they offer much less control and could lead to injury for you and/or your pet if he chooses to pull. I do not recommend these leashes for large breed dogs such as Labrador Retrievers since there really isn't much that can be done if the dog decides to run after an animal or person.

I can recall two cases early in my career when I was asked to walk large breed dogs whose owners used extendable leashes for dog walking. In each case, I was reassured there wouldn't be a problem; the dog was used to walking with the extendable leash. Although I had my reservations, I found in both cases that the dog walked me instead of the other way around. After investing in a 1-inch wide, 6 ft long nylon leash, walking large breed dogs is much easier and safer.

### **When, Where and How Often?**

Once you've gotten your dog's gear for the walk, it's time to decide when you're going to walk, what route to take and how many times a day you'll be exercising. Remember the old saying about waiting an hour to swim after eating? The same holds true for your dog. It is not advisable to exercise your dog right after a meal. Exercise too soon after eating can lead to serious problems such as bloat in breeds with deep chests (Retrievers, boxers, and dachshunds, for example).

Take into consideration your local weather conditions, too. In the summer, it is not advisable to walk your dog during the hottest time of the day; early morning and evening are preferable. If you normally take long walks, be sure to have water on hand for your dog, especially during periods of extreme heat.

When it is cold outside, dogs can get frostbite just like humans. After walking in the snow wipe off paws to remove any ice, salt, and other debris.

Variety should also be incorporated into your dog's exercise routine. Much like us, doing the same exercise routine every day can become boring to your pet. When going for walks, change

your route from time to time. The change will give your dog new sights and smells to investigate, increasing their enjoyment of the walk.

Many people believe leaving their dog in the backyard all day provides enough opportunity for exercise. Initially, the yard provides enough stimulation and area for them to get the exercise and stimulation they need. Over time, however, the same yard becomes familiar territory and they become bored. Once this happens, behavioral problems very similar to those of a dog kept inside all day will begin to surface.

If your pet is regularly left alone for many hours, consider hiring a dog-walker or taking him to a doggy day-care facility.

Dogs should have a minimum of two 15-30 minute walks daily. Older dogs may do just fine with a leisurely walk, while younger pups can probably handle a more rigorous romp.

Different dog breeds have varying exercise needs. Small companion breeds, such as Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, don't need strenuous workouts but do need good exercise and stimulation.

Working breeds, like the Border collie are bred for stamina, making their exercise needs much more strenuous. Consider the activity your dog's breed was meant to perform, like herding or retrieving, and tailor exercise to best meet those breed-specific needs. Agility training, frisbee play and even fetch are good exercise options and give owners the opportunity to bond with their pet.

If your dog is gaining weight, this is an indication more walks of longer duration are needed. As mentioned above, too little exercise often leads to behavioral troubles. Chewing and excessive barking are indications your dog may be anxious or frustrated.

## **Etiquette on the Walking Path**

Pet owners aren't always aware that rules of etiquette should be in effect when walking their dog. It is a public activity, putting the owner in contact with other pet owners and other dogs, so it's always a good idea to play well with others. Here are a few quick and easy rules to remember when out with your dog.

First, be sure you have bags to pick up your pet's waste. Exposing your pet to other dog's waste can make them susceptible to a variety of parasites, no upstanding canine wants that! Using biodegradable pick-up bags are a good ecological option since they will decompose in landfills.

Second, be cautious when approaching dogs you do not know. Some dogs may become aggressive toward you or your pet. A good rule of thumb is to avoid direct contact, cross the street if possible or turn down a side street to avoid potential confrontation. Even though your dog may be well trained, you never know how the "other guy" has trained his pet. Better to be safe than sorry.

If you're walking early in the morning or at night, be sure you and your dog have reflective gear. There are many collars, leashes and tags that have reflective materials on them.

Although you may be careful when walking your pet, occasionally they manage to slip out of their collar. Be sure your pet is wearing tags with contact information so someone that finds your pet can get them back to you. Another alternative is a collar and/or leash embroidered with your pet's name and contact information.

## **Ready, Set, Go!**

We've talked about many aspects of the walk and the benefits to you and your pet. Taking regular walks with your dog can be a bonding experience with them, as well as a time to relax for you. Studies show that dog owners are often in better physical shape and have less stress than those without pets.

Choosing the right collar and leash for your dog will ensure the walk experience is enjoyable for both of you. Picking the appropriate collar or harness can help prevent injury to your pet. The right leash can mean the difference in your dog walking you or you and your dog walking together.

Weather conditions should be considered when determining scheduling of walks. Be sure to walk when temperatures are most comfortable, extreme heat and cold can have serious consequences for your dog.

Change your walking route periodically to prevent boredom for your pet. Variety is the spice of life, so give your dog a little change in routine. This will make the experience one both you and your dog can look forward to every day. Try it, you'll both like it!

Make sure you practice good etiquette when walking with your dog. Picking up your pet's waste is important. This is one rule that is not practiced uniformly, and exposing your pet to another's waste can make them susceptible to a variety of parasites.

If you feel you or your pet may be in danger from an approaching dog while you're walking, attempt to cross the street or turn down a side street to avoid possible confrontation. Although you may have a well-trained pet, not all dog owners do...be cautious!

The walk can be a great bonding time for you and your dog. Walking eases stress, helps with weight management, it's easy and fun for you and your canine friend. So put on your walking shoes and hit the trail with your pooch!

## **Resources**

Victoria Stilwell, *It's Me or the Dog: How to Have the Perfect Pet* (New York, Hyperion, 2007)