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Walking Your Dog for Weight Loss

Veterinarians often recommend walking as a key element of most canine weight loss and fitness regimens. This sounds simple enough, but is it? The following questions are commonly asked by dog owners who are about to embark on a walking program to promote weight loss.

What sort of equipment do I need?

Forget the leash and collar if you want to burn some serious calories with your dog. Collars can compress the trachea (windpipe) when pulled, causing difficulty breathing or even a neck injury. Choke chains or any other collars that work by applying a constrictive pressure around the neck are especially dangerous. Your safest choice is a head halter (Gentle Leader, etc.) or walking harness (Ultra Paws Easy Walkin' Harness, Gentle Leader Easy Walk, etc.). Look for wide, soft, padded straps and breathable materials.

A leash of a relatively short length is preferable. If you wish to use a retractable leash, make sure it is no longer than 12 feet. You'll be keeping your canine companion close to keep up a steady pace. Save the long leash for casual strolls around the neighborhood or explorations at the park.

For long winter walks in cold climates, protective booties and dog coats may be required. If you'll be walking in hot weather (above 80-85°F or 26-29°C for most dogs), or if you'll be walking longer than 30 minutes, don't forget to carry water for both you and your dog. If you want your dog to be fashionably equipped, there are many different styles of portable water bottles available for dogs on the move.





What pace should I set?

"Few dogs will naturally walk at a pace that generates the elevated heart rates needed for sustained aerobic activity and weight loss."

Few dogs will naturally walk at a pace that generates the elevated heart rates needed for sustained aerobic activity and weight loss. Based on observations, the average pace of people walking with their dogs is 25 minutes per mile, which is actually a slow stroll. They make frequent pauses (on average every one to two minutes) for the dog to smell an interesting object or mark territory. Walking for weight loss is very different than walking for pleasure. Make your objective to walk briskly from the

beginning of the walk. Too often, if you start slowly, allowing the dog to sniff and smell everything, you may have a challenging time getting them to speed up. It's not necessary to 'warm up' before a walk or a slow jog; as hunters, dogs have adapted to be able to accelerate rapidly with very little risk of injury.

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Draw your leash close - generally within two to four feet of your body - and set off at a pace you feel comfortable sustaining. This should be about a 12-15 minute per mile pace. It should feel like a brisk walk and you should break into a light sweat. The key is to keep it up! Don't look down at your dog when they inevitably want to stop and smell something or mark a fire hydrant. Continue moving straight ahead, tighten the leash (don't jerk) and give a command such as "No stop" "Come" or "Here." Head halters are a great method for training dogs to heel during a brisk walk. If your dog sits or refuses to walk, you may have to return home. If this happens, you should crate him or put him in a quiet space without your attention and try again another time. However, this is rare, since most dogs take readily to this new form of exercise.

How long should we walk?

For most overweight or obese dogs, providing they have normal heart and lung function and no other pre-existing medical conditions, we recommend starting with 30-minute walks at least five times a week. Ideally, you should do the walking for exercise seven days a week. A sample schedule follows:

Week 1	30 minutes per day	10 minutes brisk followed by 20 minutes casual pace
Week 2	30 minutes per day	15 minutes brisk followed by 15 minutes casual pace
Week 3	30 minutes per day	20 minutes brisk followed by 10 minutes casual pace
Week 4	35-40 minutes per day	30 minutes brisk followed by 5-10 minutes casual pace
Week 5+	35-60 minutes per day	Try to do two 20-30 minute walks per day: 15-25 minutes brisk followed by 5 minutes casual pace

How often should I weigh my dog?

We recommend that you have your dog weighed at the veterinary clinic at least once a month. The weight should always be done on the same scale. At the time of weighing, have a veterinary staff member inspect the footpads for any injuries or problems. Once your pet reaches its desired weight, he or she should be re-weighed every three months to ensure that weight loss is maintained.

Remember, physical activity such as this should be thought of as "fun with a purpose". When you combine exercise with proper diet and lifestyle, you contribute to your dog's health and well being and improve the quality of life for both of you.



*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Ernest Ward, DVM
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