



Putting your best paw forward

Your dog is the best fitness machine

By Lisa Treen

The sweet, spring smells remind us that summer is just around the corner. With warmer weather and shedding of winter clothes and for some of us, it's time to shed a little more than just layers. If you've recently walked past a shop window and wonder "who is that fat person following me?" only to discover that it's your reflection, then now is the time to get moving.

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A gym membership, even for three months, can run into hundreds of dollars. And many of us run out of self-motivating steam way before the expiry date. Those fancy gadgets hawked on daytime and late night TV can fold easily under the bed and that's where many find their eternal resting place.

But most of us dog lovers have a great powerhouse of fitness just at knee or shin level. They stare up at us and with big eyes and will us to toss another treat. But deep in their hearts and expanded tummies, they're a great motivation and are our cheapest fitness, most practical and best machine—our dogs.

And let's not forget about our own waistlines here—statistics are a sobering reminder that our pets are piling on the kilos too. But there's good news for us dog owners. A 2007 study conducted at the University of Western Australia (UWA) showed that dog owners are seven times more likely to achieve the recommended level of exercise per week than non-dog owners. Study author Hayley Cutt said dog owners in the study exercised 55 more minutes a week on average than those without a canine pet.

"The findings of the study show that there's a clear benefit of owning a dog and that it encourages you to be more physically active and get out there each day and go for a walk with your dog," she said.

So we've devised a plan to get our two legged friends and four legged mates up and moving for this summer edition. And before of any of you roll your eyes and say it's too hard – all we ask you (and your dog pleads) –give a minimum of 30 minutes a day to start with. That's the time to sit down and watch an episode of Home and Away or to fold a weeks worth of washing or to encourage your housemate to cook a plate of tacos. Better still, it's a leap out of bed 30 minutes earlier than you would normally get up. You'll feel energized and clearer, ready to tackle a new day.

Why we should get moving

Physical activity does not have to be vigorous or done for long periods in order to improve your health. A 2007 study of inactive women found that even a low level of exercise—around 75 minutes per week—improved participants' fitness levels significantly, when compared to a non-exercising group. And your dogs are going to love you for it. Dogs who get leash and off leash time get a rush of smells and visual information.

Walking is a great physical activity for most people. Regular walking can help you lose body fat, maintain a healthy weight, improve your fitness and reduce your risk of developing conditions such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and some cancers. And it can release much needed endorphins that are powerful hormone-like substances produced in the brain that function as the body's own natural painkillers. During exercise, there is a release of endorphins in the body that are capable of producing feelings of euphoria and a general state of well-being.

Why walk when you can run

Walking is low impact, requires minimal equipment, can be done at any time of day and can be performed at your own pace. You can get out and walk without worrying about some of the risks associated with other more vigorous forms of exercise. Even though walking is a 'weight

bearing' exercise, it's kinder to your joints than running. It's also a great form of physical activity for people who are overweight, elderly or those who haven't exercised in a long time. Walking is a great stress buster too—just make sure you're using your walking time to get out into the fresh air and not just trolling around the supermarket aisles.

Strapping on a pedometer is a great way to determine just how much you're moving. A pedometer measures the amount of steps you take. A recommendation is for an accumulation of 10,000 steps per day. A pedometer also makes it easy for you to see any increase in your activity level and monitor your walking sessions.

Pedometers have kept pace with technology so there's a range of styles and add-on functions with prices to match. There are even online stores that sell these so that you can make educated comparisons and choose the one that's right for you. The basic style of pedometer clips to your clothing just above hip level and can be as simple as pendulum style that sits at waist level and relies on accurate placement for the most accurate reading.

The more expensive end of the pedometer market is an accelerometer pedometer that come in a traditional clip-on style or an easy to wear watch. It automatically distinguishes between running and walking. These clever little devices not only calculate steps, but your average speed, distance caloric expenditure and total exercise time. They take some input to program initially, but the pay-off is that they're very accurate and you can literally see your step tick the pedometer over. You can also program these to automatically record at the times you're likely to have walk sessions. And the other bonus is that there's no fiddly recording as you fumble to open the pedometer case and no annoying, clicking sound heard with traditional pedometers.

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Dogs help children fight obesity

Dogs really are children's best friend in the fight against childhood obesity. A recent Deakin University study found that young children who have a family dog are less likely to be overweight or obese compared to those who don't have one.

The study of more than 1100 children aged five to 12 found they were in much better shape if they had a dog, even if they did not walk it regularly. The findings show that even incidental play helped children keep weight off. Even children who owned other pets like cats and rabbits were less likely to be overweight.

The study, published in the Health Promotion Journal of Australia, follows a previous paper from the same researchers that found young girls who owned a dog were physically active for 30 minutes more than those without a pet.

Why dogs are great for kids

At Urban Animal we're convinced a dog is the needed ingredient for a happy childhood. Here are just some of the reasons why dogs are great for kids.

- Dogs always think you're the smartest kid, especially if you can toss a ball or stick.
- Dogs are always happy to join your team for a game of backyard cricket.
- Dogs think you smell great—even if the rest of your family think you stink.
- Dogs don't care about the 3-second rule. If you drop it, it's theirs and you don't need to worry about picking it up.
- Dogs are appreciative audiences for your bathroom Australian Idol sessions.
- Dogs are willing to eat that piece of Nana's tasteless and dry shepherds pie.
- Dogs couldn't care less if you don't clean your bedroom.
- Dogs are happy to help find your lost tennis balls.
- Dogs are great listeners after a hard day at school.
- Dogs can get back at your mean sister by chewing her Brats dolls.

And finally, with a dog you always have the ultimate excuse to not hand in homework. Dog ate it!



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There are very few dog pedometers on the market—the one readily available will set you back \$14 to \$19, however they're not waterproof or even water resistant. Perhaps I should say they're not 'my-dog-proof' because a brand new one lasted 1.5 walks (less than 24 hours) on a drizzly day. We contacted the suppliers and they told us that no claims were made for the longevity of the product. Moisture or any kind of mild precipitation and it's death for a product that isn't very accurate, nor has much puff in its rrruff!

The simple things you'll need

Shoes – invest in a good pair of shoes. Sounds simple, but a pair of well fitting shoes that give proper arch support are vital. A comfortable walk shoe will reduce injury, make your walk more comfortable, and reduce your chance of having an accident such as slipping.

Comfy clothing – dress for the weather and walking success. Comfortable clothing is a must for walking and adequate support in the areas that matter is a must for the ladies reading this. Some of the big brand athletic apparel manufacturers have comfortable and surprisingly flattering designs available for active walkers and runners. The fabrics used are designed to pull moisture away (or wick) from you and keep you drier and more comfortable. You can pay a couple of hundred dollars for a nifty ensemble or keep it simple by wearing some old t-shirts and trackie daks.

A bag for essentials—bum bag, training bag or just a little back pack with the essentials is all you need. Somewhere safe to stash your keys, money, phone, poo bags and training treats for your dog.

Protection—sunscreen and a hat are optional but highly recommended. Zinc on doggy noses is also a good idea. Clothing and walking shoes that have reflective material help keep you visible on dark mornings or overcast days.

A dog (of course) and a good leash, harness and/or halti. The right equipment can make your time out more pleasurable. A harness or head collar that controls a pulling dog will ensure you're not being dragged to and from the park.

Mix it up and ramp it up

If you're going to take the step to get more active with your dog, then you need to commit to ramping up your normal walks. That means finding new and interesting parks and challenging terrain. Quite often, dogs view their regular parks as extensions of their own backyard. This can result in them becoming bored with the sights and sounds, or worse—territorial. Getting your dog out and into new 'neutral' territory will make excursions exciting and more pleasurable. You and they will probably make some new friends.

Each week, add a little more time to your walking routine and make it more challenging. Make a conscious effort to increase the size of your stride and/or step a little faster. All of these factors will contribute to a more demanding walk. Getting on track and increasing your walking time, distance and efforts will be of great benefit to you and your dog. So what are you waiting for? Get moving!

The fatty files – a personal note from Lisa Treen and a porky pooch

Oh the shame, when a couple of months ago it was pointed out (by some well meaning folk) that Scooter was looking... well, a little porky. In fact the term used was a fat pig. At ten months of age it was indelicately confirmed that Scootie had the pup equivalent of muffin-top and back fat. Was he grossly overweight? No, but apparently it wasn't just puppy fat and certainly it wasn't the 'breed ideal'.

Taking my dogs' health as a seriously as I do, I decided to really see just how much exercise we were doing together. I'm a particularly fast walker and can really get a cracking pace and Scooter's no slouch at morning runs either—although lean Lilly still beats him paws down. Convinced that I was doing at least 2-3 kilometers with him I decided to get an accurate pedometer one for me and dog one for him.

We're out, rain or shine, walking every morning for at least an hour together. That comprises ten minutes leash walking and then 40 to 60 minutes off leash time. I'm not a stand-and-talk-to-your-mate-while-your-dog-plays-with-other-dogs type of dog walker. I'm more a keep-up-with-me-if-you-can-and-we'll-fit-in-a-conversation dog walker. So the pedometer used over a four-week period was going to confirm whether we really were getting in the kilometers or whether I had been fooling myself.

As it turns out, the 10,000 steps suggestion for a healthy, daily step rate in adult humans was surpassed by me at around 8:00am – that's walking two dogs separately. Clocking over 4 kilometers on average with Scooter, meant that he was probably running and walking about 5-6 kilometers—and we'd been doing this for some months.

So I had to look at what was going into his gob—from the training snacks, the pigsie ears, the Kongs stuffed with peanut butter and his general food. Some good advice from an associate suggested that I should be looking at the superpremium dog food. Because it packs a punch in what is digested and actually absorbed (as opposed to lesser foods that just merely pass like an unenthused tourist through the digestive system), I should measure and monitor the amount fed.

My big fat dog problem solved. Cut back on the Scootie snacks and measure the food and feed slightly less. The result has been that the Pooter no longer looks like the porker. His waist (and yes he did have one before this) is leaner and you can see his back ribs better—as opposed to just seeing his front ribs. And when he runs, he no longer looks like a jiggling dog version of a lava lamp.

The moral of this portly Pooter is that we need to exercise our dogs well but we also need to look at the input as well as the output.



Pedometer images by Animax