



## Wag more: A tale of healthy living

### *Canine companionship yields heartfelt benefits for many people.*

Nearly half of U.S. households include at least one canine family member. For most owners, the responsibilities and costs are easily outweighed by the unmatched love and devotion that dogs can offer.

Can canine companionship make a difference in your cardiovascular health? According to the American Heart Association and Dr. Elizabeth Frates, assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, the answer is an emphatic "yes."

#### **Walking buddy**

Dr. Frates admits that she wasn't always a dog lover. It was through her research into lifestyle and behavior change that she became a fan of the furry creatures. "We're in the midst of a diabetes and obesity epidemic in this country. Research shows that people who have a dog are far more likely to get the recommended 150 minutes of moderate physical activity each week," she says.

It's pretty easy to see how dogs work their magic. Your dog is the ultimate exercise partner. Unlike a human walking buddy, a dog will never choose to grab a cup of coffee instead of going for a brisk walk, no matter how miserable the weather. Dog ownership can even encourage physical activity among people who traditionally get less exercise. Walking with a dog may lessen an obese person's feelings of embarrassment about his or her appearance and ability to walk. Being out and about with a dog may also enhance your sense of social connectedness by providing opportunities to meet and interact with other people. Finally, a tired dog is a happy dog. You and your pup will likely both sleep soundly through the night after a good day of sniffing and fetching.

#### **Blood pressure and beyond**

In multiple studies, dog owners have been shown to have lower blood pressure than non-owners. One small study went so far as to explore if dog ownership could serve as a treatment for high blood pressure. Thirty people with borderline hypertension were assigned either to adopt a dog from a shelter or defer adoption to a later date. Blood pressure was similar in both groups at the start of the study. But over five months, systolic blood pressure (the first number in a reading) was significantly lower in the dog-adoption group. Later, blood pressure also declined for the other group, once they took their dogs home.

#### **Stress busters**

Interacting with a dog is calming for humans (and for the dogs, for that matter). People with dogs appear to have less cardiovascular reactivity when they are mentally stressed, meaning their heart rate and blood pressure go up less and return to normal more quickly. Researchers attribute this effect to a reduction in levels of the stress hormone cortisol. Among older adults in particular, dog ownership seems to confer a sense of well-being.

Dogs may also soothe loneliness and combat anxiety and depression. These positive responses may result from the release of oxytocin, a powerful hormone and brain chemical secreted by the pituitary gland during social bonding activities. Because the power of touch appears to be a major component of this "pet effect," cat owners should not despair. Time spent with feline friends may offer a comparable heart-calming payback.

#### **Not a pill**

If you think getting a dog may be just what the doctor ordered to improve your heart health, Dr. Frates says it's essential to understand what makes the canine connection so powerful. "A dog is not a pill like a cholesterol-lowering agent. The advantage comes out of the behavior changes that need to take place in order for you to walk and care for your dog," she says. If your living space or work schedule doesn't accommodate dog ownership, there are other avenues for achieving canine camaraderie. You can offer to take a neighbor's dog out for a daily jog or volunteer your dog-walking services at a local animal shelter.

## How to walk a dog in 5 easy steps

**Set your goal.** Dogs need to exercise at least once a day. A good rule of thumb is to walk a dog a minimum of two blocks for every 10 pounds of the dog's body weight.

**Chart your course.** Choose a walking route that's fun and safe for both you and your dog. Avoid busy roads if your dog is fearful around traffic. Also, climbing hills or traversing uneven terrain may be too challenging if you or your dog are out of shape or have physical limitations.

**Practice leash skills.** To make walking work as a form of exercise, teach your dog to heel on a leash, or you'll spend most of your time wrangling the dog and not getting up to walking speed.

**Design your regimen.** As with other aerobic activities, begin with a five- to 10-minute warm-up, then proceed to at least 10 minutes of brisk walking. Finish up with a five-minute cool-down period to let your heart rate return to normal.

**Cool off and check in.** Fill a water bowl after each outing so your dog can drink freely. Be aware of signs of overexertion in your dog, such as heavy panting, limping, or excessive sleeping.

Source: *Harvard Medical School Special Health Report, Get Healthy, Get a Dog* ([www.health.harvard.edu/DOG](http://www.health.harvard.edu/DOG))

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