



Exercise—what your dog needs!

It is not unusual for me to discuss pet obesity and pet behavioural problems several times a day when I'm at work! Keeping a pet fit and healthy can be difficult with today's busy schedule. Work and family obligations can keep you from providing your pet the exercise that is needed to maintain a healthy weight. A dog left to their own devices all day can also become very bored, lonely...and destructive.

Obesity

Many clients are very surprised when I tell them their dog is overweight. When looking at your dog from above they should have a clear waist area between the ribs and the hips, and when looking from the side they should have a clear abdominal tuck. You should be able to feel the dog's ribs relatively easily without thick padding over them.

As pets put on weight their activity on average decreases, which makes it even harder to keep a healthy weight. Many dogs, especially those in the Retriever families (but other breeds as well!) will overeat and seem hungry constantly. A higher than normal body weight can have the following consequences for dogs:

- Orthopedic injury: joint injuries from being overweight are extremely common. The heavier the dog is, the more likely they can have sprains, strains, back pain and ligament tears. This makes exercise even harder for them! The cranial cruciate ligament of the stifle (ACL in the human knee) is easily torn when a dog is overweight. This usually requires surgery, a healing time of about 6 weeks, and is costly. Even arthritis is much worse when a dog is heavy.
- Shortened life span: numerous studies have shown dogs that are overweight will die almost 2 years before dogs of normal body weight.
- Increased risk for anesthesia: dogs requiring general anesthesia and are overweight are at increased risk because they have less room for the lungs (decreased lung volume) and the heart must work harder to pump blood through all the organs and body fat.
- Skin problems: overweight dogs often have more skin folds than normal, especially around the hind end. This can lead to chronic infections in the area around the anus, the anal glands, and around the vulva.

· **Overheating:** excess body fat is insulating, and dogs can only cool themselves by panting. In hot weather, this can cause an overweight dog to overheat much faster than a dog with normal body condition.

Behavioural Consequences

Even lazy dogs can show negative behaviours when not given sufficient exercise. This can turn into severe behavioural problems such as separation anxiety. When a pet has separation anxiety they become extremely anxious when left alone. I have seen numerous cases of this where pets have become destructive and caused damage to their owner's home and injury to themselves.

Most dogs need regular exercise in order to have normal emotional development. Walking and running is a purposeful exercise that most dogs enjoy. Higher energy breeds such as Retrievers, Vislas, GSPs, and many others can be very hard to manage without vigorous and prolonged daily exercise.

Starting an Exercise Program

Long walks or runs can be very beneficial for dogs who are very active, overweight, or having behavioural problems—or even to prevent these from happening! Any exercise program should start out gradually with some conditioning. Pets who are severely overweight, are limping, or have health problems should be checked with a veterinarian prior to starting a program. Pets with short faces (brachycephalic) such as Bulldogs, Pugs and others should exercise with caution, especially in hot weather. Having a short nose means there's excess tissue in the soft palate, which makes breathing harder and noisier, and makes cooling much less efficient.

Regular, sustained exercise at a pace that will elevate the pet's heart rate is required to help them burn more calories and keep a healthy weight. This type of exercise is much less likely to cause joint injury than aggressive sprinting and jumping activities. Having someone experienced with conditioning and exercising dogs can be very helpful for keeping your pet a healthy weight. In addition, regular sustained exercise outdoors can reduce excess energy and decrease unwanted behaviours such as separation anxiety.

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