

Dog Walking Safety Tips

What a blissful sight: dog owner strolling through the park with a well-behaved dog trotting calmly on the end of a leash. Unfortunately, sometimes the sight is more chaotic than calming with the dog tugging fitfully on the leash as the owner stumbles and struggles to gain control. Everybody prefers the first scene, but if you aren't properly prepared, walking your dog might not be a "walk in the park!"

Here are a few tips to make walking a safe and pleasurable outing for both you and your dog. Get a physical before you get physical. Have your veterinarian clear your dog for any new physical activity. This is especially important for older dogs that may have joint issues, like arthritis, but it's also important for growing puppies that have immature joints. Strenuous exercise can be painful for both the very young and the very old. Ask your veterinarian to outline an appropriate exercise regimen for your dog. Your senior dog may need anti-inflammatory or pain medication to stay comfortable during and after exercise. On the upside, walking will help your older dog shed pounds and relieve the burden on older joints. Before walking, you may want to see your own physician for a check-up!



Have a talk with your dog. Walking is an adventure! Your dog will enjoy new sights, smells and sounds that she encounters while strolling. Some dogs get really excited when exposed to something interesting and new. They forget their manners and rush up to the interesting dog or person or bird or squirrel....you get the picture. While you should have leash control of your dog, it's a good idea to have a back up control mechanism in the form of voice commands. Your dog should listen when you talk! She should sit, stay, or come when called. So before setting out on a hike, spend some time reviewing (or teaching) basic obedience skills.

Use proper exercise equipment. To have tangible control over your dog, it's important to have a sturdy leash that is 4-6 feet long attached to a properly fitting collar or harness. Wrap the leash around your palm so it doesn't slip out of your hand. Retractable leashes are made to give dogs a little extra freedom and privacy when on potty walks, but aren't the best restraint for exercising. Some pet owners allow their dogs to roam off leash. This requires walking in a controlled environment with a well-behaved dog. Off-leash play is allowed in many dog parks, but may be restricted on walking paths, so follow the rules wherever you go. A short leash is always a safe bet and facilitates a quick retreat in case you are approached by something that's not so friendly, like a loose dog, porcupine, skunk, or other wildlife.

Wear the proper exercise attire. You'll need sturdy walking shoes to protect your feet, but your dog's feet need protection, too. Avoid extremely hot concrete, asphalt or sandy beaches that can burn tender foot pads. Here's a good rule of thumb: If the walking surface is too hot for you to place your hand or bare foot on it for 10 seconds, then it's too hot for your dog to walk on "bare pawed." There are booties for dogs that walk on really hot or really cold surfaces. These booties also protect your dog from chemical irritation that may occur when walking on snowy or icy sidewalks that have been treated with salt or de-icing compounds.

Check those tootsies. After a walk, it's a good idea to look at your dog's paws. Check for cuts, bruises and foreign bodies like cockle burrs or splinters. If you walked on the beach or in the snow, wipe your dog's feet with a warm, wet towel. Clean between the toes and around the foot pads well. While you're at it, take a peek for unwanted hitchhikers (fleas and ticks) you may have picked up during your walk. Look for ticks between toes and around ears. Look for fleas over the tail and under the belly. If you live in a flea or tick infested area, ask your veterinarian about the best preventive for your dog.

Survey your path. If you are walking in the neighborhood, be mindful of traffic patterns. Be respectful of cars, bike riders, and other pedestrians. Voice commands come in handy to steady your dog when approached by any of the above. If your dog becomes too excited, have her sit until the approaching person passes. If walking on a nature trail, watch out for rough terrain that may be hard on your dog's joints. Beware of uphill climbs if your dog is elderly or has joint issues.

Be prepared for clean-up detail. A nice long walk is a great time for your dog to go to the bathroom. Be a conscientious dog owner and steer your dog away from your neighbor's lawn. Bring along plastic bags to clean up after the event no matter where she goes. Find a walking path that has good potty spots.

Keep hydrated. Staying hydrated is important for both you and your dog. For long walks, bring along a collapsible dog bowl or water bottle fitted with a special spout that allows your dog to sip easily. Offer frequent drinks especially if going on long walks in warm weather. Human sports drinks are not formulated for dogs, so it's best not to share your power drink.

Carry identification. Both you and your dog should be identified when venturing away from your home in case you become separated while walking. Since your dog doesn't have a driver's license, he will need to carry another form of identification. Many people place ID tags with the dog's name and owner's phone number on the collar. Collar tags provide quick identification making you only a cell phone call away. Since collars or ID tags can be lost, a more permanent means of identification provides an added measure of safety. Microchips inserted under the dog's skin carry identification information that can be read with specific scanners. Veterinary hospitals and rescue facilities reunite many dogs and owners by reading microchips. Many microchips refer to a national database that stores the contact information of thousands of pet owners. Newer technology may read this information directly from the microchip making the call to the information center unnecessary. See the article Microchipping Your Dog and ask your veterinarian about the latest in microchip capabilities.

Be seen. If you walk early in the morning or late in the evening, it is important to make sure you and your dog are visible to drivers. Reflective gear is great, but only works if the vehicle's headlights hit you; that isn't much help if a vehicle backs down a driveway unexpectedly. Having a light of some kind for both you and your dog is the best way to be seen. You can find small, clip-on lights in sporting goods stores.

Warm up and cool down. Allow your dog a little time to warm up his muscles before setting out on a vigorous walk. Let him smell the flowers and take a potty break. This will help satisfy his curiosity and decrease the number of potty stops during your walk. Toward the end of your exercise outing, you should both cool down a bit by strolling a more slowly for the last part of the walk.

Walking with your dog should be an enjoyable time for both of you. So stay safe, and have fun!

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Lynn Buzhardt, DVM
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