

## Paws & Effects

### Dog ownership has many health benefits, both mental and physical

by: Jill Barker

My three-year-old, 85-pound mixed breed canine, Dallas, has become a problem. He used to get a 15-to 20-minute walk around the block every morning and evening. Now, with more time on my hands and a pressing need to look at something other than my computer screen, our daytime walks have stretched to more than an hour, with a lengthy game of fetch somewhere in the middle.

We repeat the same routine most evenings for another 30 to 45 minutes.

So thrilled is Dallas with all this exercise that he's become increasingly needy if his walk is delayed. Zoom calls that interfere with his new timetable are met with plenty of acting out, similar to a toddler whose parent is on the phone.

Turns out I'm not alone. Most dog owners in my neighbourhood say their best friend is loving the extra exercise. As for the owners, all those additional minutes spent walking are good for their own health and well-being.

Then again, dog owners have always been known for logging more walking minutes than the general population. A review of 29 studies suggests that dog walkers benefit from an extra 52 minutes of physical activity a week, which is a significant contribution toward the recommended 150 minutes necessary to reap health benefits.

Yet despite these findings, it's not clear if it's actually the dogs who provide all the motivation, or whether dog owners themselves are inherently more active than non-owners. And since the responsibility of walking a dog is often expressed as a deterrent to ownership, it's likely that anyone who is happier on the couch than at the other end of a leash isn't looking to adopt a rescue pooch like Dallas any time soon.

To find out more about how dog ownership affects the fitness and wellness of their masters and mistresses, a team of Australian researchers gathered three groups of non-dog owners: soon-to-be dog owners (those who became owners within a month of baseline), those motivated to get a dog but willing to delay until after the study, and those who had no interest in having a dog.

All three groups - 71 participants in total - were similar in baseline characteristics in terms of gender, smoking and alcohol habits, minutes spent walking per week, sedentary behaviour and blood pressure.

The only significant difference was age: those who had no interest in having a dog were 13.8 years older than prospective dog owners.

After the initial baseline metrics were collected, check-ins occurred three and eight months later.

Participants were asked to log their number of walking minutes per week. The data collected revealed that new dog owners performed an additional 93 minutes of exercise per week three months into the study. Eight months in, the time spent walking the dog had dropped to 50 minutes per week.

Based on accelerometer data, those minutes translated into roughly 2,589 steps per day at three months and 1,396 steps at eight months.

In addition, the new owners performed eight more sit-to-stand transitions daily at three months and 4.6 sit-to-stand movements at eight months. There was no change in blood pressure in any of the three groups.

"We found evidence that dog acquisition improves objectively measured physical activity and sedentary behaviour patterns within the first few months of dog ownership," said the researchers.

They're not the only ones who think having a dog is good for your health. According to a study published in an American Heart Association journal, dog ownership was associated with a 24 per cent reduced risk of all-cause mortality and a 31 per cent lower risk of death by heart attack or stroke.

Of course, not all dogs and owners are keen on long walks. But even exercise bouts of 10 minutes a couple times a day are effective in boosting health. Those benefits are even more heightened in folks who go from doing no exercise to some exercise. And while it's typical for owners to settle into a more regular schedule and duration of walks as they better understand their dog's needs, there's no ignoring a dog who wants walking.

In fact, a dog ends up being the perfect exercise buddy - they're persistent at getting you off the couch when you don't feel like it, and reliable in their desire to get in a daily bout of exercise. And if they're like Dallas, they don't take no for an answer. So, like it or not, rain, shine, sleet, hail or snow, dog owners log a few hundred steps on their Fitbit or Apple Watch every day.

And dogs aren't just an incentive to exercise: their companionship has been linked to reduced stress, anxiety and depression, and fewer bouts of loneliness. They also promote the opportunity to socialize with your neighbours and other dog owners (from a safe distance these days, of course).

Combine the added physical activity with the boost in mood and socialization, and dog ownership has the potential to be good for both mind and body.

Dallas would agree.

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