

5 Ways to Help Keep Your Older Dog Fit

Just as important for older dogs as it is for youngsters, exercise helps keep joints flexible, muscles strong, and your pet mentally stimulated, fit and trim. Help ensure his golden years are happy and healthy with these five options for staying active and comfortable.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- It's important for dogs to be active throughout their lives, and movement is just as important for older dogs as it is for youngsters
- Frequent walks are an excellent way to keep your dog fit and fully mobile; done right, they can also keep her mind stimulated and her social skills sharp
- Regular hydrotherapy sessions are another great tool to help older dogs exercise
- Exercises specifically designed to maintain your dog's strength, flexibility and balance are a must, along with gentle stretching; also don't overlook the benefits of massage to enhance your dog's comfort and mobility

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As I often discuss here at Mercola Healthy Pets, dogs are designed for movement no matter their age. An active dog is a happy dog (and a tired dog is a better-behaved dog). One of the most important things you can do for your furry best friend is provide her with plenty of opportunities to stay physically active throughout her life.

Movement is just as important for older dogs as it is for their younger counterparts. Regular exercise keeps your pet's joints flexible and her muscles strong. It burns calories and provides mental stimulation. Daily physical activity slows the aging process and enhances quality of life. Dogs who remain active at every age tend to live longer, higher quality lives than pets who aren't given daily opportunities for physical movement.

The following are five ways you can keep your dog active, mobile and comfortable to ensure her golden years are happy and healthy.

Walking

Walking is great lifelong exercise for both you and your older canine companion. Most dogs love to get out and about, and while seniors might not be able to do much power walking, several short walks each day and two or three 30 to 60 minute weekly sniffaris will go a long way to keep your aging dog's body and mind in healthy and fit.

You'll want to avoid longer walks when it's very cold or hot outside. In the warmer months, keep an eye on your dog for signs he's tiring out or overheating. Walking up gradual (not steep) hills will help strengthen his hips; taking a zigzag pattern on steep downhill stretches will prevent stress to his front legs.

Training walks with your older dog can help keep his mind sharp. These walks can be about refreshing his leash manners, teaching new obedience commands, or for ongoing socialization. Also consider change-of-scenery walks. Drive your dog a few blocks away or to a neighborhood park for a stroll. These outings will serve up new things for him to see, smell and experience.

If your dog is comfortable around other dogs, consider meeting up with neighbors or friends with dogs for group walks. Everyone on two legs and four gets to socialize and exercise simultaneously, and dog parents can also be valuable resources for one another.

Swimming

Since natural bodies of water can hold unpleasant and even toxic surprises for dogs, and the water in backyard swimming pools tends to be cold and not recommended for pets with arthritis, the ideal situation if you can arrange it is to bring your dog to a water therapy (hydrotherapy) center. The water is warm in hydrotherapy tanks and pools, which is soothing to aging and sore joints and muscles. Hydrotherapy is a favorite of mine for many reasons:

- Movement in water provides gentle resistance to help strengthen muscles
- The water's buoyancy helps support the weight of animals who aren't as strong as they used to be
- The lack of gravity relieves stress on degenerating joints
- The pressure of water on the body improves circulation and helps decrease swelling

In addition, walking on an underwater treadmill actually provides for better extension of limbs and joints than swimming, and it tends to be less fear-inducing for dogs who aren't used to being in water.

Exercises to Maintain Strength, Flexibility and Balance

In older dogs, the aging process can lead to a vicious cycle of decreased muscle strength, increased muscle stiffness and an overall decrease in balance. The inactivity resulting from this dynamic often leads to weight gain, which adds stress on joints that are no longer well supported by adequate muscle mass.

One way to help avoid this downward spiral is to ensure your dog engages in exercises specifically designed to maintain strength, flexibility and balance. There are three categories of these exercises:

- Movements that target the big, body-supporting muscles like the quadriceps, hamstrings and gluteals
- Movements that maintain balance and fluid movement
- Passive range-of-motion (PROM) exercises for joint health

You can find a full description of these exercises [**here**](#).

Stretching

Stretching helps your dog's body relax while promoting flexibility. You can enhance her stretching routine with some gentle hands-on movements of her front and rear legs, shoulders, spine, elbows, knees, wrists, ankles, chest and shoulders.

Stretches are best done after exercise. There are three areas of your dog's body for which stretching is especially beneficial — the hips, shoulders and back. The stretches shown and described [here](#), done slowly and gently, are well-tolerated by most dogs.

Instructions for most of these stretches have your dog standing, but you can also do them with her lying on her side, or in the case of the chest stretch, on her back. Some dogs are very uncomfortable in this position, so if yours is, don't force the issue.

Needless to say, if she shows any sign of pain during stretching, discontinue the movement and have her seen by your veterinarian as soon as possible.

Massage

Canine therapeutic massage offers benefits such as increased muscle flexibility, reduced pain in stiff joints and muscles, stress relief, and improved circulation. Massage can even help alleviate problem behaviors such as sensitivity to touch, fear-biting, food or dog-related aggression, and separation anxiety.

Massage for pets, especially older dogs, involves slow, gentle strokes and stretches, combined with light, rhythmic tapping. Benefits of regular massage for your pet include:

- Helps keep your senior dog's muscles toned and reduces the slackening that comes with aging
- Massaged muscles are looser, which makes it much easier for your dog to move around comfortably
- Massages improve circulation and encourage lymphatic drainage
- Regular massage also eases the stiffness of arthritis, which can help your pet maintain his normal gait and active lifestyle
- Massage loosens the muscles around joints, which also helps promote ease of movement

If you're interested in finding a professional canine massage therapist, it's important to note that some therapists will come into your home while others work out of veterinary clinics. Ask your integrative veterinarian for a recommendation.

You may also like the idea of massaging your pet yourself, and this can have additional calming and bonding benefits. If you'd like to go this route, consider taking a workshop or continuing education course to learn basic hands-on massage skills — programs are offered at all levels, for pet parents simply looking to massage their own pets to those interested in becoming licensed animal massage practitioners.

Whichever avenue you choose, offering the benefits of therapeutic massage to your dog is one of the greatest gifts you can give him to support his happiness and quality of life.

Sources and References

[Bark June 2020](#)
