

Are You Depriving Your Dog of This Natural Instinct?

It's essential for your dog's physical and mental well-being, but pet parents often ignore it - or deliberately curtail it, not realizing it's how dogs connect themselves to their environment. Know that robbing your dog of this natural instinct can lead to sensory deprivation and increased stress.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A team of citizen science researchers in France monitored the pulse rates of 61 dogs on short walks, both on leash and off
- Their results show that the activity of sniffing lowers dogs' pulse rates, especially when they're on a long leash, and off leash
- Another instinctive activity that lowered the dogs' pulse rates was "shaking it off" while walking and sniffing
- These study results provide additional evidence of the benefits to dogs of being allowed to sniff the world around them
- It's important to your dog's physical and mental well-being that you give her lots of opportunities to sniff up a storm on her walks with you

If you're a dog parent, do you encourage your canine BFF to indulge one of his most natural instincts — sniffing the world around him? I sure hope so, because allowing your dog to follow his nose is extremely important for his mental health, and based on the results of a fascinating study, it's a boon for his physical health as well.

The study was conducted by a pair of citizen science researchers, Cristina & Aurélien Budzinski, who describe themselves as dog lovers and certified dog trainers from France who "promote observing dogs and field studies to have a deeper understanding of dogs." They call their study "At the heart of the walk," and it reveals some wonderful insights into what's happening physiologically when dogs go on walks.

Intense Sniffing Lowers Dogs' Pulse Rates

The Budzinskis recruited 61 dogs for their study, including puppies, adults, and seniors. There were 37 males and 24 females. The majority of adult females were spayed; the majority of adult males were intact. There were 14 small, 17 medium-sized, and 30 large dogs, from Chihuahuas to a Cane Corso.

Each dog was walked for 5 minutes on a short leash (5 feet), 5 minutes on a long leash (16 feet and flat, not retractable), and 5 minutes off-leash. The order of the walks was random, and the dogs' pulse rates were monitored on each walk. The data the Budzinskis collected on the walks is enlightening:

- While on the short leash, the dogs spent an average of 37 seconds sniffing

- On the long leash, they averaged 103 seconds — a 280% increase
- Off-leash, the average time sniffing was 119 seconds, which is a 330% increase over sniffing time on the short leash
- Sniffing lowered the dogs' pulse rates, even as they walked
- The more intensely they sniffed, the lower the pulse rate

These results were consistent for all dogs regardless of age, size or sex; whether they were walked every day or almost never walked; and whether they pulled at the leash or didn't.

'Shaking It Off' Also Lowers Pulse Rates

Interestingly, the Budzinskis also measured the dogs' pulse rates while they engaged in another common canine behavior — especially when wet — called "shaking it off." All the dogs shook their bodies during their 5-minute walks, and they did so most often when their pulse rate was especially high. "Shaking it off" caused their pulse rates to decline. A few stats:

- During their 15 minutes of walking, 80% of the dogs shook it off, and almost all shook their bodies before, during, and after the walks
- They shook it off more frequently while on the long leash than the short leash, or off-leash
- There was a total of 165 shakes with an average length of 2 seconds
- The average decrease in pulse rate was 12%

Being 'Smell-Blind' Is Stressful to Dogs

Dogs are brilliant sniffers by design, and I often wonder if pet parents truly understand their dog's need to explore the world with their nose. Some dog owners seem in such a hurry to get their walks over with, they don't give their pets a chance to satisfy their urge to sniff their environment.

Animal behaviorist Marc Bekoff, Ph.D. believes there is potential for sensory deprivation and stress in dogs who aren't allowed adequate sniffing opportunities:

"Being smell-blind can be aversive to dogs. My recommendation is to let dogs sniff; let's not hijack one of their vital connections to the world. Let them sniff to their nose's content when they're tethered on a leash, or when they're walking and hanging out with friends and others and running freely."

As mentioned, not allowing dogs to exercise their nose and other senses could be a form of sensory deprivation that robs them of information they need to figure out what's happening in their world. Being smell-blind can indeed be stressful to dogs because they need odors and other information to assess what's happening around them."

A New Way of Thinking About Dog Walks

Many pet parents tend to look at dog walks as chores to be quickly finished, and I think part of the reason is they're simply in a rut, and also not picturing life from their dog's perspective. Sniffing isn't just fun for dogs, it's a necessity for them to feel connected to their environment.

I recently had one researcher use this analogy: taste is for humans what smell is for dogs. Sure, we could have calories delivered to our stomachs that bypass our mouths (and taste buds), but that would make food (and eating) much less enjoyable for us. The same is true for dogs who are denied olfactory input and stimulation; their quality of life can be negatively impacted.

There are actually lots of ways to change up your dog walking routine that can make it fun for both you and your four-legged companion, and something you look forward to.

8 Different Types of Dog Walks

- **Purposeful walks** — These are typically short and have a specific goal, for example, walking your dog to her potty spot.
- **Training walks** — These walks can be about improving leash manners, learning basic or advanced obedience commands, ongoing socialization, or anything else you can think of that can be done on a leashed walk. Be sure to bring some healthy training treats on these outings.

Ongoing training throughout your dog's life is a great way to keep his faculties sharp and boredom at bay. It's also a wonderful way to strengthen the bond between you and your pet.

- **Mentally stimulating walks** — Most leashed dogs don't get to spend nearly as much time sniffing and investigating as they would like, so allowing your pet some time to explore is good mental stimulation for her. These walks allow her to stop, sniff, investigate, and send and pick-up pee-mail. Dogs accumulate knowledge about the world through their noses.
- **Sniffaris** — I love this word! Sniffaris are walks during which your dog takes the lead, you follow, and he gets to sniff whatever he pleases. Sniffaris are upgraded mentally stimulating walks, more or less, with your dog making all the navigational and investigational decisions!
- **Power walks** — Power walks keep your dog's frame strong, his weight in check, and help alleviate arthritis and other degenerative joint diseases. These walks can also be an essential method for ensuring your dog gets the exercise he needs, as long as you're consistent with them.

Remember: A healthy dog needs to exercise an absolute minimum of every three days (every other day is better; every day is ideal) at an intensity that elevates his heart rate for 20 minutes to maintain cardiovascular conditioning and muscle tone. If your dog is out of shape, you'll need to start slowly and build gradually to 20 minutes per power walk.

- **Walks with friends** — 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.
- **Different dog-walker walks** — Everyone walks a dog a little differently, so the more members of your household who walk your dog, the more variety she'll enjoy. And since walks done right are bonding experiences, everyone in the family gets to spend one-on-one time with the dog.

A variation on this if you work outside the home is to hire a professional dog walker a few times a week or ask a willing friend or neighbor to take your dog out for a walk in your absence.

- **Change-of-scenery walks** — Instead of heading outside in the same old direction, instead, buckle your dog in and drive a few blocks away or to a neighborhood park or nearby hiking trail for your walk. Both you and she will find new things to see, smell, and experience.

Take-home message: Not every walk you take with your dog has to be a leisurely sniff-fest. But at least once a day, let your canine BFF sniff to his heart's content and feel good that you're helping him lower his pulse rate while also allowing your dog to be a dog!

Sources and References

[Bark October 2019](#)

¹ [Dog Field Study, Pulse Study, At the Heart of the Walk](#)

² [Psychology Today, November 7, 2017](#)
