

How to Make Walks Enjoyable for You and Your Dog

January is Walk Your Dog Month for a very good reason - dog walks are essential for the physical and mental well-being of your pup, and maybe you, too, no matter the time of year. If you dread or avoid walks for any reason, here are some tips for getting you both back on track for the new year.

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- January is Walk Your Dog Month; no matter the weather, your dog (and every dog) needs daily exercise and the mental stimulation of being outdoors
- Walks are essential for the physical and mental well-being of canine companions; with a leash-trained pet and the right attitude, they can be very beneficial for us, as well
- The most important thing you can do to set yourselves up for a lifetime of enjoyable walks is to help your canine family member learn to be the perfect walking partner
- Dogs who are enjoyable to walk have learned that loose leads are good, taut leads are not, and pulling against the lead is pointless
- Once your dog is dependably good on a leash, use your imagination to come up with different types of walks that will keep the activity fun and fresh for both of you

As a fitting (pun intended) way to kick off the new year, January is designated **Walk Your Dog Month**, and while the weather in many places may not seem conducive to outdoor dog walks, the timing is intentional.

The truth is that most dogs in the U.S. don't get nearly the amount of exercise they need, with the result that over half the canine companions in this country are obese. And while the weather outside may be frightful, it's not enough to exercise your furry family member only on warm, sunny days. Dog ownership means making a commitment keep your pet moving, rain or shine (or snow).

Dogs need walks not just to relieve themselves, but for exercise and mental stimulation as well. They need opportunities to get outside, put all available paws in contact with the earth, interact with their environment, move their bodies, and socialize with other humans and dogs.

Setting the Stage for a Lifetime of Good Walks

If you're one of the many dog parents who dreads walks because your dog actually walks you or exhibits other bad leash manners, the following information will hopefully be helpful.

Needless to say, the best way to develop a positive dog walking habit is when your pet is a puppy. In fact, as soon as her immune system is strong enough to protect her from communicable disease (discuss when it's safe to take her on adventures with your veterinarian), she's ready for walks with you or other family members.

She should already have her own secure-fitting flat collar (no choke or pinch collars, please) and ID tag, and she should be accustomed to wearing it before you attempt to take her for walks.

Some puppies have no problem wearing a collar; others do. If yours is fighting it, as long as you're sure it isn't too tight (you should be able to easily slip your fingers under it) or uncomfortable for some other reason, distract her from fussing with it until she gets used to it. It shouldn't take more than a couple of days for her to forget she's even wearing it.

If you plan to use a head halter or harness for walks (which I recommend for any dog at risk of injury from pulling against a collar/leash combination), again, get your puppy comfortable wearing it. As with the collar, this needs to happen before you attempt to attach a leash and head out the door.

Once wearing her collar and a halter or harness is second nature to your dog, you're ready for the next step. Attach about four feet of light line to the collar or harness — cotton awning cord or light cotton rope will do — and let puppy drag it around the house under your watchful eye. She'll get used to it being attached, as well as the tug of it when she steps on it, or it hangs up on something.

Once she's used to the 4-foot line, move to a 10 to 15-foot line of the same material and head outside.

Act I: Training Your Dog to Follow on a Loose Lead

Initial walks should be short for most puppies — the main goal is to get your dog used to being attached to you by a lead. Find a safe environment and allow puppy to drag the line behind him for a bit, then pick up the opposite end. Let him lead you around for a few seconds while you hold the line just off the ground. Slow down so he's forced to slow down, ultimately to a stop. Take a short break for praise and a little **playtime**.

Next, let him trail the line again, but when you pick up your end this time, call him and stand still. If he pulls, hold your ground without pulling him in your direction. The goal is to teach him to put slack in the line himself by moving toward you. When he puts slack in the line, praise him and call him to you.

If he comes all the way to you, give him more praise and a training treat. If he stops on his way to you, tighten the line just enough to apply a tiny bit of pull to it. Immediately call him to come again. Give praise as he moves toward you and treats when he comes all the way back. Two or three repetitions is all many puppies need to understand lack of tension in the line is what earns praise and treats.

When your pup has learned to come towards you to relieve tension on the line, you can begin backing up as he comes toward you to keep him moving. Next, turn and walk forward so he's following you. If he passes you, head in another direction so he's again behind you.

The goal is to teach him to follow on a loose lead. Once you've accomplished the goal, you can continue to use the light line or replace it with a leash.

Depending on your pup's temperament, 5 to 15-minute sessions are sufficient in the beginning. Practice controlling him on the lead for 30 second intervals during each session. Exercise patience and don't engage in a battle of wills with your pup. Don't snap, yank, or otherwise use the line for correction or punishment. Stop before either of you gets frustrated or tired.

After each short session on the lead, liberally praise your puppy and spend a few minutes playing fetch or some other game he loves. Remember: you're building the foundation for an activity both you and he will enjoy and look forward to throughout his life.

Act II: Reducing Your Dog's Urge to Pull

If your little guy or girl just doesn't seem to be catching on to the loose lead thing, don't despair. Some puppies and untrained adult dogs stubbornly fight the pressure of the line rather than create slack.

If your puppy freezes on a taut line or consistently pulls against it, it's important to use a halter or harness rather than a collar attached to the lead, because she can create serious neck and cervical disk problems for herself by pulling against a collar/leash combination.

Next, make sure you're not part of the problem. Our human instinct is to hold the leash taut, so you must also train yourself to move in ways that keep slack in the line. A dog's natural response to a tight line is to pull against it. Once you're sure you're not contributing to your pup's refusal to create slack in the lead or move toward you, do the following:

- Maintain tension on the line and turn your back to her. Allow time for it to occur to her she can't win by pulling against you.
- Remain still with your back to her holding the tension in the line — don't jerk it, don't pull, or yank her toward you, and don't put slack in the line yourself, as this will show her that the way to get slack is to pull at the line, which is exactly the opposite of what you're trying to teach her.

The message you want to send to your pup is that pulling on the lead doesn't accomplish a thing. It doesn't change the scenery, it doesn't get you moving in a direction she chooses, and it doesn't earn praise or treats. Eventually, she'll stop doing what doesn't work, especially when she's consistently rewarded for desirable behavior.

From the very first moment you begin leash training, make sure your puppy accomplishes nothing by pulling on her line. It takes some dogs longer than others to learn to keep the leash loose, but with patience and persistence, any puppy can learn to follow on a loose lead.

Getting the Most Out of Every Walk

Once your furry companion has acquired good leash manners and both of you look forward to your walks each day, consider changing up the routine to keep things fresh and fun. Different types of dog walks:

1. **Purposeful walks** — These are typically short and have a specific goal, for example, walking your dog to her potty spot.

2. **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 slow and build gradually to 20 minutes per power walk.

3. **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 pick up and send pee-mail. Dogs accumulate knowledge about the world through their noses.
4. **Sniffaris —** Sniffaris are walks during which your dog takes the lead, you follow, and he gets to sniff whatever he pleases. Think of sniffaris as upgraded mentally stimulating walks, with your dog making all the navigational and investigational decisions.
5. **Training walks —** These walks can be about improving leash manners, learning basic or advanced obedience commands, social interactions, 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.

6. **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.
7. **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.
8. **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.

One of the most important gifts you can give your dog whenever you interact with him, including on walks, is your undivided attention. Put down the phone and other distractions and let him know through your focus on him how much he means to you.

Sources and References

[National Today](#)
