

One of the Biggest Dog Walk Mistakes Owners Make

This common habit exposes dogs and walkers to potential danger from an out-of-control vehicle, an aggressive off-leash dog or a trip-and-fall off a curb into traffic.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Many people multitask while walking their dogs; some even see dog walks as an opportunity to accomplish two or three or four other things. However, research suggests that just 2.5% of people are able to multitask effectively
- Distracted dog walking is potentially dangerous for both dog and walker, because when your attention is focused elsewhere, you may not be able to react quickly enough to avoid, for example, an out-of-control vehicle, an aggressive off-leash dog, or a trip-and-fall off a curb
- Additional drawbacks to distracted dog walking include setbacks in your dog's training or mental health, opportunities for mental stimulation through sniffing, and dog-owner bonding activities
- Whenever possible, take advantage of different types of dog walks to keep things interesting for both you and your furry family member

The "busy-ness" and hectic pace of our world today coupled with the ever-present cell phone or other electronic device, means most of us are multitasking during all or part of our waking hours — including when we're walking our canine BFFs.

In fact, many people actually view dog walks as an opportunity to multitask, leading their pets around the block while they read emails, return a phone call, or push their child in a stroller.¹ Others combine dog walking (in this case, dog trotting) with exercises like jogging or biking. For most of us, juggling multiple activities feels productive, and relieves the boredom of taking daily walks over the same terrain day in and day out.

However, while all this multitasking may seem like a great idea to you, your furry friend at the other end of the leash is unlikely to share your enthusiasm, which can be confusing, frustrating, and even dangerous to his welfare.

*"It's kind of like the dog-walking equivalent of distracted driving," Leslie Sinn, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist in Ashburn, Virginia, tells CNN. "You're not paying attention to the signs that your dog is uncomfortable ... and if you're missing all those clues because your head is elsewhere, that's a problem."*²

Danger Ahead!

When you're focused on things other than your pet during walks, which is another way of saying you're ignoring your dog, it can pose a safety problem. You see, multitasking isn't all it's cracked up to be, and in fact, it isn't actually possible. According to the Cleveland Clinic:

“We’re really wired to be monotaskers, meaning that our brains can only focus on one task at a time, says neuropsychologist Cynthia Kubu, PhD. ‘When we think we’re multitasking, most often we aren’t really doing two things at once. But instead, we’re doing individual actions in rapid succession, or task-switching,’ she says.”

“One study found that just 2.5% of people are able to multitask effectively. For the rest of us, our attempts to do multiple activities at once aren’t actually that.”³

Potential threats you might not see if your attention is elsewhere on dog walks include oncoming vehicles, bicyclists, joggers, and off-leash dogs. By the time you become fully aware of a threatening situation, your dog might already be in a fight with another dog — or worse.

“You need to be alert at all times,” Jacob Hollier, founder of Crate Escape, an Atlanta-based dog-walking and pet-sitting service tells CNN. “If there’s a car out of control or a scooter coming on the sidewalk ... at any given moment, it could be dangerous and possibly be fatal.”

In addition to the risk to your dog, you can also injure yourself if you’re distracted. For example, you can slip off a curb or trip over an uneven sidewalk or even your poor pooch. According to a study published a few months ago, injuries to humans while dog walking increased more than fourfold from 2001 to 2020.⁴

And another thing — dogs are facultative, or scavenging, carnivores, and often live up to their reputation! As any dog parent reading here today can attest, our canine companions are famous (and infamous) for eating all kinds of things they absolutely should not.

“If you aren’t paying attention, dogs can pick up and eat things QUICKLY — chicken bones, cigarette butts, dead/poisoned rats, etc.,” Amy L. Pike, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist in Fairfax, Virginia, tells CNN. “If you didn’t see it, you won’t know to take them into the vet. Or if you do take them in because they are sick, you won’t know what they ingested, which helps your vet treat them.”

More Downsides to Distracted Dog Walking

As if all the above wasn’t enough, behavior experts and trainers warn that distracted dog walking can also be detrimental to a pet’s behavioral training and mental health. If you’re focused on other things while walking your dog, you can miss opportunities to reinforce basic commands such as sit, stay, come, etc. in real-life settings.

It’s also easy to miss signs of anxiety, fear, fatigue, injury, or sudden illness in your dog when your attention is elsewhere.

*“Your dog ‘speaks’ primarily with their **non-verbal body language**,” Pike explains. “If you aren’t paying enough attention to what they are ‘saying,’ you won’t know how your dog feels.”*

Walks aren’t just about physical exercise for dogs — they’re also opportunities for mental stimulation. And according to Valli Parthasarathy, a board-certified veterinary behaviorist at Synergy Veterinary Behavior in Portland, Oregon, dogs do best when there is structure and consistency on their walks.⁵

If you're just sort of dragging your dog along or aren't paying attention to her, she could become confused by the conflicting signals you might be sending, for example, allowing her to sniff in one area, then jerking her away from another. Parthasarathy has even seen distracted dog walkers yank on the leash while their pet is in the middle of peeing or pooping.

Dogs need **plenty of time to sniff** because they experience the world through their sense of smell.

"My ideal walk for a dog is one where they have a lot of time to sniff and take in their environment," Parthasarathy says. "They have their own doggy priorities. Using the nose is their enrichment ... it's like they're reading the news."

Walking your dog is also an opportunity for bonding, but if you're not mentally present during your walks, there will be little of the interaction and fun that forms a bond.

With all that said, it's certainly understandable that there are times when returning a phone call or pushing a stroller while walking your dog is unavoidable, and times when all you have time for is a quick dash outdoors for a potty break.

"Everyone's trying the best that they can," Parthasarathy says. "But going for a walk with your dog should be about building that relationship and focusing on what your dog needs. That may be the only time he gets out of the house that day."

Getting the Most Out of Walking With Your Dog

Just like us, dogs can get bored with the same routine day in and day out and appreciate it when we change things up a bit. Fortunately, there are different types of dog walks you can choose to keep things interesting for both you and your furry companion.

1. **Purposeful walks** — These are typically short and have a specific goal, for example, walking your dog to her potty spot.
2. **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.

3. **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.

4. **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.

5. **Sniffaris** — 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!
6. **Change-of-scenery walks** — Instead of heading outside in the same old direction, 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. Make a commitment to 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

^{1,2,5} [CNN, July 6, 2023](#)

³ [Cleveland Clinic Health Essentials, Why Multitasking Doesn't Work, March 10, 2021](#)

⁴ [Maxson, R. et al. Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise 55\(9\):p 1577-1583, September 2023](#)
