

The 'Unlucky 7' Actions That Can Shorten a Dog's Life: How Many Are You Doing?

Most dog parents do many things right and just a handful of things wrong. Yet this small handful of 'Unlucky 7' actions has a tremendous effect on your dog's well-being and longevity. Don't put your pup's life at risk, please vow to give these actions the extra attention they deserve.

Reviewed by [Dr. Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- There are common things pet owners do that can negatively affect their dog's quality of life and also his lifespan
- Being overweight or obese can shorten a dog's life by almost a year
- Skipping wellness visits means you may not learn until it's too late that your dog has a serious disease
- Ignoring your dog's exercise needs can result in obesity, mobility issues, and behavioral problems
- Failing to adequately socialize your dog can result in fear-based aggression and generalized anxiety

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Most dedicated dog parents do many things right, and a few things wrong, in the care of their much-loved canine companions. These are very lucky dogs, because their guardians are doing almost everything right.

However, there are a handful of things dog owners should pay more attention to. These are the "Unlucky 7," because overlooking these aspects of pet care can compromise both the quality and length of a dog's life. How many of these are you guilty of?

The Unlucky 7

1. **Letting rover get overweight (or even obese)** — Studies show that dogs who are overweight at middle age may not be around as long as those at a healthy weight.¹

Being too heavy can shave up to 10 months off a dog's life, and this is particularly apparent in five breeds: the Labrador Retriever, Golden Retriever, American Cocker Spaniel, Beagle and the Shih Tzu.

Also at issue is the quality of life of overweight and obese pets, many of which suffer from mobility problems and other obesity-related conditions in their golden years.

Because so many pets are overweight these days, it's common for veterinarians to see animals suffering from health conditions secondary to their obesity, including arthritis, hip dysplasia, diabetes, hypertension,

respiratory problems, and kidney disease.

Obesity may even contribute to cancer in pets because of its role in chronic, long standing inflammation.

Tragically, dogs that are nearly immobile from a combination of weight and joint or bone problems are becoming commonplace. Otherwise alert, healthy dogs are being euthanized because they simply can't get around anymore, which destroys their quality of life.

If your canine companion is too heavy, you must help your dog reach a healthy weight.

2. **Dodging doggy dental care** — When plaque is allowed to accumulate on your dog's teeth, within a few days it hardens into tartar. Tartar adheres to the teeth and irritates the gums.

Irritated gums result in an inflammatory condition called gingivitis. Dogs with gingivitis have red rather than pink gums, and they often also have stinky breath.

If the tartar isn't removed, it builds up under the gums, eventually causing them to pull away from the teeth. This creates small pockets in the gum tissue that trap additional bacteria in the mouth.

At this stage, your dog has developed an irreversible condition called periodontal disease, which not only causes considerable pain, but can also result in abscesses, infections, loose teeth, and bone loss.

When your dog develops periodontal disease, the surface of his gums is weakened, which can allow mouth bacteria to invade the bloodstream and travel throughout the body. If his immune system doesn't kill off the circulating bacteria, it can reach the heart and infect it.

Studies have shown that oral bacteria, once launched into the bloodstream, seem able to fight off attacks by the immune system.

A Purdue University study points to a strong correlation in canines between gum degeneration and endocarditis, which is an inflammatory condition (infection) of the valves or inner lining of the heart.²

Researchers also suspect certain strains of oral bacteria may lead to heart problems.

Some types of bacteria found in the mouths of dogs produce sticky proteins that can adhere to artery walls, causing them to thicken. Mouth bacteria are also known to promote the formation of blood clots that can damage the heart.

For the health and longevity of your dog, it's important to proactively manage the plaque and tartar that accumulates on his teeth.

3. **Skipping wellness checkups** — Regular at-home wellness exams are recommended. In addition, for healthy dogs preferably two (especially important if your pet is over 8), but at least one wellness checkup with your veterinarian per year.

And keep in mind that yearly vet visits should not be about re-vaccinations. The purpose should be to proactively review the status of your dog's health. These exams will allow you and your veterinarian to stay on top of any changes in your pet's health so you can take appropriate action sooner rather than later.

Also, regularly reviewing diet, supplement protocol, and exercise habits with your vet insures you're meeting your dog's dynamic healthcare needs. Wellness and nutritional goals change yearly, and over the age of 8 can require fine-tuning every four to six months, depending on your pet's vitality.

4. **Ignoring the athlete inside your dog** — In order to stay lean, fit, well-conditioned, emotionally balanced, and fully mobile as she ages, your dog needs a good workout every day.

Canines are designed by nature for movement. If your dog doesn't get opportunities to run, play and get regular aerobic exercise, even if she's not overweight, she can end up with arthritis and other debilitating conditions that affect the bones, joints, muscles and internal organs.

In addition, many canine behavior problems are the result a lack of physical and mental activity.

What many people don't realize is that like their owners, dogs need reasons to get physically active. Even the biggest, greenest backyard isn't by itself enough to motivate your pet to get the exercise she requires to stay in good physical condition.

The only way to make sure your dog gets enough exercise is to provide her with the companionship and incentive she needs to stay active. Your dog should be getting a minimum of 20 minutes of sustained heart-thumping exercise three times a week.

Simply strolling with your dog isn't an adequate workout. He needs sessions of power walking — moving at a pace of 4 to 4.5 miles an hour (about a 15-minute mile) — to achieve good cardiovascular intensity and caloric burn. Exercising your dog an hour a day can significantly contribute to her longevity and overall well-being in a variety of ways.

If you aren't able to move at this pace, consider involving your dog in other types of cardiovascular exercise like swimming, fetch, Frisbee, agility competition, flyball or dock jumping. You could also take a bike ride alongside your dog using a special dog bike leash.

5. **Smoking around your dog** — If you smoke cigarettes, you're aware of the risks, not only to your health, but also to others around you who are exposed to your smoking. But what many people don't understand is the danger smoking poses for pets.

Secondhand smoke is smoke that is exhaled or released into the air from a burning cigarette or cigar.

Thirdhand smoke is the residue that remains in the smoker's environment on furniture, rugs, curtains, fabric lampshades, clothing, human skin, animal fur, and other surfaces.

Research shows that both second and thirdhand smoke is dangerous to animals. Studies have concluded that dogs living in smoking households are more likely to suffer from respiratory diseases like asthma and bronchitis, and also lung cancer, than dogs living with nonsmokers.

If you or another member of your household smokes, avoid smoking inside your home or anywhere your pet spends time, and don't allow others to poison your dog's environment, either. It's also important to note that it's not just about contaminants in the air. Smoke particles cling to everything inside a home, so the rug your dog lies on, or the blanket your kitty naps on are coated with cigarette residue if people smoke indoors.

Don't leave cigarette butts for your dog to find. Dispose of nicotine gum or patches appropriately. And don't assume e-cigarettes are a safer alternative to smoke around your pet, as the FDA has found they also contain a number of potentially toxic chemicals.

After smoking, wash your hands before handling your pet. If your dog likes to snuggle in your lap, change to clothes you haven't smoked in. Also consider investing in a quality air filter unit and keep up with filter changes as recommended by the manufacturer.

6. **Not training your dog to be a good canine citizen** — Sadly, animal shelters are full of dogs who didn't get a proper start in life, and developed behavior problems as a result. An unpredictable or out-of-control family dog can be difficult to be around, and poses a danger to himself, as well as other animals and people.

One of the most important things a guardian can do is provide basic positive reinforcement behavior training for their canine companion. The goal of positive reinforcement training is to encourage "more of this" (desirable behaviors) and "less of that" (undesirable behaviors).

In order to reach that goal, you must teach your dog what TO do rather than focusing on what she's doing wrong. Use training sessions to let your pet know which behaviors earn her praise, attention and affection.

If your pet has frustrating behaviors you can't seem to resolve, it's best to partner with a positive reinforcement trainer until you've worked through your dog's issues. Taking decisive action will benefit the health of your long-term relationship with your canine companion.

7. **Failing to understand the importance of socialization** — Socialization means exposing your dog (preferably as a puppy) to as many new people, animals, environments and other stimuli as possible without overwhelming him. Socialization should engage all of your dog's senses though exposure to the sights, sounds and smells of daily life.

This exposure will help him develop a comfort level with new and different situations, with the result that he'll learn to handle new experiences and challenges with acceptable, appropriate behavior. Dogs that have not been adequately socialized often develop entrenched fear responses and generalized anxiety, resulting in behavior problems that can make them unsuitable as family pets.

Sadly, almost half of all dogs relinquished to shelters have at least one behavior problem — aggression and destructiveness are among the most common. These behaviors often originate from the fear and anxiety that develops as a result of improper or incomplete socialization.

Sources and References

[PetMD](#)

¹ [EurekaAlert October 4, 2013](#)

² [Purdue University News, April 9, 2009](#)
