

Exercise

Engaging in physical exercise triggers a chain of chemical reactions in the body and brain that promote a feeling of calm. The mechanism works in essentially the same way in both dogs and people. Have you ever noticed how relaxed your dog is after a long walk? Achieving that calm, relaxed state is important, and doubly so for anxious, fearful, “hyperactive,” or aggressive dogs.

How much exercise your dog needs depends on his breed, size, age, and physical condition. Most healthy adolescent Labrador Retrievers, for example, would benefit from at least an hour of exercise a day. If your dog is not accustomed to regular exercise, start slowly. Build duration and intensity gradually, and don't count on your dog to tell you when he is tired.

Walks: Daily walks allow for not only physical exertion, but mental stimulation in the form of stimulating scents. Sniffing where other dogs have left their marks is like reading a community bulletin board: *Hmm, an adolescent male has moved into the neighborhood. Aah, Fifi was here!* These daily outings provide a great excuse for you to get out and exercise as well.

Hikes: Like walks, but in a fabulous doggy amusement park! Hikes provide the opportunity to romp over dirt trails and play among shady trees, checking out natural scents along the way. Keep initial outings brief, and tailor hikes to your dog's comfort level and physical capabilities. Follow posted rules and always be aware of your surroundings. If your dog is fearful or reactive with other dogs or people, keep him on leash and hike when you are less likely to encounter others. Plan outings when the weather is cool, and always bring along water for both of you.

Outdoor Play: If your dog will retrieve, toss a ball or favorite fetch toy in your backyard. If your dog is reliable off-leash (he will come every time you call) and is dog-friendly, playing with other dogs at the dog park is a great form of exercise. (Monitor all interactions; not all other dogs are friendly.) If you're lucky enough to have a swimming pool, let your dog swim! Swimming is great cardiovascular exercise, and strengthens muscles without stressing joints (especially good for dogs with arthritis or other joint-related conditions). Assuming good physical health, other aerobic options include jogging with your dog, or having him run alongside a bicycle attached by a device such as the Springer or K9 Cruiser. Consider dog sports such as agility, tracking, and Rally O (a gentler form of competition obedience).

Indoor Exercise: Tug is a great game that can be played with a rope toy, and has the added benefit of building canine confidence. A prerequisite is that your dog understands “Drop it”—to release the object he is holding. Start playing, then periodically freeze and ask your dog to “Drop it.” When he does, pause, then resume the game. If your dog's teeth touch your skin at any point say, “Too bad!” and put the toy away. Fetch is another great indoor game if you have the space. And don't forget recreational chewing! It provides exercise for your dog's jaws, is an excellent outlet for excess energy, and has the important benefit of being a canine stress-reliever. Appropriate chew toys should always be available.

If you're too busy: Consider doggy daycare, a neighbor who might like to switch off “play dates,” or a professional dogwalker, friend, or student who will come by and walk your dog.

Check with your veterinarian before starting your dog on any exercise program or sport. Young puppies and dogs with injured or weak shoulders, knees, ankles, or hips should not engage in any activity that involves jumping, or compete in any strenuous sport.