



Fit For Man and Beast *By Joe Stein, President*



About half of us are overweight. A lack of physical activity has reduced bone density and muscle mass. Our metabolism is sluggish, and behavioral problems are becoming more apparent. Pent up energy has caused you to start chewing table legs again. Wait a minute—not you...your dog! Could your dog be suffering from the same 21st Century maladies as you? Just as ancient man spent his days hunting, gathering and doing physical work, dogs were and still are geared for hunting, pulling sleds, shepherding, guarding and swimming. Like their human counterparts, dogs have replaced their fight or flight with stew and chew.

Can we rekindle the ancient bond between man and dog so that each can help the other to find better health and fitness? Both man and beast were designed by nature to live active, energetic lives. So, how can we safely and effectively train with our primal exercise partner?

Just as you would not begin an exercise program without a consultation from your doctor, a trip to the veterinarian is the first step in developing a plan for your dog. Medications, allergies and health histories need to be reviewed.

As a general rule, older dogs cannot run or play the way younger dogs do. Toy breeds and dogs with short legs and elongated spines, such as Dachshunds, were not designed for running. When exercising, puppies and young dogs of giant breeds such as Saint Bernard, Great Dane and Irish Wolfhound, care must be given not to stress the joints by working too hard. Also, big dogs tend to overheat, as their weight does not allow them to cool down quickly. Dogs with very sparse coats do not do well in very cold or very sunny weather. Boxers, Bulldogs and those dogs with pushed-in noses cannot breathe as effectively as other dogs, so special caution is needed especially on hot, humid weather. Golden Retrievers, German Shepherds, Rottweilers and others are robust breeds, but are more prone to hip dysplasia. Your vet can provide you with additional valuable guidelines. The level of exercise must be appropriate for your dog as well as you.

What are some good exercises to do with your dog? Walking, playing Frisbee and jogging are simple, playful activities that can be scaled to the fitness level of you and your dog. You can even do simple intervals like I do with my ten year old English Setter, Jackie: walk three blocks, jog one, walk three, jog one, etc. Whatever you decide to do, there are some simple guidelines to follow to help ensure you and your canine companion stay safe and have fun:

- If you are beginning an exercise program, start slowly and build up gradually.

- Keep your dog on a leash; it's the law in most areas. In addition, it lets you enhance your bond and reinforces the hierarchy of control between you and your dog.
- Check your dog's feet to see that there are no thorns or burrs, that the nails are not damaged, that there is no ice, chewing gum or chemicals on or between the pads.
- Wear reflective gear when it is dark...both of you.
- Keep a couple of plastic bags with you, as exercise can stimulate your dog's need to eliminate.
- Check for ticks and fleas after spending time in a wooded area.
- Use a safety harness or restraint system designed to protect you and your dog while traveling to your exercise destination.
- Be alert for signs of overexertion and heat stroke. If your dog exhibits rapid breathing, salivation, muscle tremors, convulsions or vomiting, move your dog in the shade; cool him down; and get him to the vet immediately.
- Drink some water before and after you exercise, this goes for man and beast.

Dogs like routine. Be consistent so that you and your four-legged friend develop a mutual exercise habit. A 30-minute walk or other vigorous play most days of the week will keep you both healthy and fit.

When we look at ancient cave paintings, we see dogs at man's side as trusted partners in the hunt for food. I hope in the future, anthropologists will find our walls covered with pictures of people and their dogs in the hunt for fitness.

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