

Grab the leash: Dog walkers more likely to reach exercise benchmarks

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Man's best friend may provide more than just faithful companionship: A new study led by a Michigan State University researcher shows people who owned and walked their dogs were 34 percent more likely to meet federal benchmarks on physical activity.

The results, said epidemiologist Mathew Reeves, show that promoting dog ownership and dog walking could help many Americans - of which fewer than half meet recommended levels of leisure-time physical activity - become healthier.

"Walking is the most accessible form of physical activity available to people," Reeves said. "What we wanted to know was if dog owners who walked their [dogs](#) were getting more physical activity or if the dog-walking was simply a substitute for other forms of activity."

The study appears in the current issue of the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*.

Using data from the Michigan Behavioral Risk Factor Survey, an annual health survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Michigan Department of Community Health, Reeves and his team found that not only did owning and walking a dog impact the amount of walking a person does but also that dog walkers were more active overall.

The study showed people who walked their dogs generally walked about an hour longer per week than people who owned dogs but did not walk them.

"Obviously you would expect dog walkers to walk more, but we found people who walked their dog also had higher overall levels of both moderate and vigorous physical activities," he said. "There appears to be a strong link between owning and walking a dog and achieving higher levels of physical activity, even after accounting for the

actual dog walking."

The study analyzed the amount of leisure-time physical activity a person gets; examples include sports participation, exercise conditioning and recreational activities such as walking, dancing and gardening. Public health benchmarks call for at least 150 minutes of such activity a week.

"There is no magic bullet in getting people to reach those benchmarks," Reeves said. "But owning and walking a dog has a measurable impact."

He also pointed out the social and human/animal bond aspects of owning a dog that has been shown to have a positive impact on quality of life. And since only about two-thirds of dog owners reported regularly walking their dogs, Reeves said dog ownership represents a opportunity to increase participation in walking and overall physical activity.

"The findings suggest public health campaigns that promote the responsible ownership of a dog along with the promotion of dog [walking](#) may represent a logical opportunity to increase physical activity," he said.

Other findings in the study revealed: Middle-age people have the least amount of time to walk their dogs; younger and older people get the most [physical activity](#) benefit; dogs 1 year old or younger were more likely to be walked than older dogs; and larger breed dogs (those more than 45 pounds) were walked for a longer duration than smaller dogs.

Provided by Michigan State University

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