



Dog ownership can address obesity epidemic

Benefits of pets and physical activity

- Research suggests that pet ownership may increase physical activity and reduce health problems such as obesity
- Walking a dog may act as a buffer against stress

A growing body of research shows that pet ownership confers physical health benefits. Dog owners in particular may be more likely to engage in regular physical exercise through walking or playing with their dogs. In addition, dogs may offer some protection from the onset of obesity in young children.³⁵

With around 20 to 25 per cent of Australian children estimated to be overweight or obese, the impact of dog ownership on community health is potentially very important.

Associate Professor Jo Salmon, Senior Research Fellow in the School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences at Deakin University said that obesity causes problems in respiratory and gastrointestinal functioning as well as contributing to long term health issues such as orthopaedic problems and increased risk of impaired glucose tolerance which can lead to diabetes.

“Obesity also causes enormous psychosocial distress, with overweight children being described by their peers as the least desired friends.”

Dr Salmon, Deakin University

“Increased physical activity is obviously one of the keys to reducing a person’s weight and studies in both Australia and overseas have shown that owning and walking a dog can substantially increase the amount of walking a person does.”

Previous research found that young girls who own a dog spend 29 minutes more per day in physical activity compared to those without a dog.⁴¹

“This means that they are achieving half the recommended level of physical activity for children just through the activities they undertake with their dog,” said Dr Salmon.

The subsequent study looked at over 1100 children aged from five to twelve. Researchers found that children were in better physical condition if they owned a dog.

The greatest benefit was seen in five to six-year-olds, who were 50 per cent less likely to be overweight or obese compared with those who did not own a dog.

Interestingly, the benefits flowed even if the dog was not walked regularly; suggesting incidental activity, informal ‘backyard’ play and regular interaction with the dog had a calorie-burning effect.

It isn’t just the young that benefit from walking the dog. According to Dr Salmon, dog walking is a low-cost, low-impact, low-risk activity suitable for people of all ages.

Another recent study by Dr Hayley Cutt at the University of Western Australia found that dog owners reported that their dog was a strong source of motivation, companionship and social support that encouraged them to walk.

National Heart Foundation Physical Activity Manager Trevor Shilton argues that “While dogs are very good social support, they’re also a good social lubricant. If you’re walking your dog and interacting with people there is a reasonable prospect you’re benefiting your heart in several ways.”

Tips

- Raise awareness of the health benefits of happy, healthy pets
- Start a dog-walking group in your local area
- Engage qualified dog trainers to hold obedience classes in pet-friendly parks

Web Links

The Heart Foundation - www.heartfoundation.org.au

