

How to shed pounds with your pooch

Study shows people who exercise with their pet tend to keep weight off ...



By Kim Campbell Thornton ...

What's one sure-fire way to tell that it's time to lose weight?

Patti Lawson, author of "The Dog Diet: A Memoir," offers this no-nonsense tip:

"If your dog is able to bite the extra fat on the back of your arms, it's time to tone them up!"

At least six new books That's right, the answer to a more svelte you, propose ways to use your pooch to shed your paunch.

might just be staring you in the face, tongue out and tail wagging.

Take your dog for a walk ... Every day ... Twice a day if you can manage it.

But what makes walking the dog better exercise than, say, jogging or spinning or pole dancing?

Inspired by a study done at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, the book ... "Fitness Unleashed"... showed that people and dogs who exercised together lost weight and kept it off.

Veterinarians, Marty Becker and Dr. Robert Kushner explain why exercising with a dog works.

"It builds on the wonderful, powerful bond between people and pets, and it brings up positive associations in both two-legged and four-legged participants," they write.

Basically, people stick to the routine because they love their dogs and they see that their dogs are visibly happier and healthier.

Whether you want to admit it or not, you probably need it too.

A recent Finnish study found that pet owners tended to be heavier and less active than those without animals. It's not that having a pet makes us fat, but that those of us who own one are more likely to be middle-aged, sedentary home owners.

In other words, if you have a pet, you might be exactly the person who could benefit most from a little exercise.

Think of your pet as a built-in fitness partner. When you exercise with Buster, he's always there, ready when you are. He's not going to tell you that he can't make it because his Thursday meeting is running late, and he's not going to say "Let's skip it tonight; I worked too hard today."

Best of all, you don't need to wear Lycra or use any special equipment other than a leash and good walking shoes.

How to get going ...

What if, like me, you have a dog that would rather sniff than set a snappy pace, or one that's really too old to go for much of a walk?

No excuses. There are ways around both those issues.

Let the first five minutes be a warm-up. This is when Buster can meander and sniff and check his pee-mail. Then distract him and give the command — "Let's go" — that indicates it's time to get a move on.

"Pretty soon, they understand 'OK, I get a little time for myself first, but then I've got to hop-2-it on the rest of this walk,'" says Becker.

The other way to motivate your dog to pick up the pace is to provide rewards throughout the walk on an unpredictable basis. In other words, every walk should be a canine visit to Las Vegas.

For the ball fanatic, work in a game of 'fetch' along the way if there's a safe place to do so. If your dog likes to dig, find a place where he can excavate for a while (don't let it be the neighbor's yard). For your scent-hound's pleasure ... try a new and different route.

Entice Buster with a treat at a certain point in the walk. Make it a different treat every time — kibble one day, cheese the next, chicken jerky the day after that. He should never know when to expect play time or treat time during the walk.

When you do this, Becker says, dogs have a heightened sense of anticipation, so they spend less time sniffing, more time walking at a brisk pace.

Exercising with old dogs ...

What about the dog that's old or infirm and can't walk very far? Get a jogging stroller, Kushner advises. That works ... or you can pull your dog in a child's wagon. Toy dogs can ride in a dog stroller or even a child's doll buggy.

But for the average healthy dog and owner, the best advice is just to get out there and simply walk.

"If you're a couch potato and rarely get out there, either walking with your dog or any walking at all, start off with bite-size pieces: 5-, 10-, or 15-minute walks accumulated over the day so you end up with 30 or more minutes a day," says Kushner. "If you are reasonably active already, increase your intensity: walk faster or farther."

Condition your dog as well, and be sensible about his physical capabilities. Dexter the Dachshund isn't going to travel as far or as fast as Louie the Lab. Build up distance and speed gradually. "We wouldn't run the New York Marathon the first time we thought about it," Becker says. "You need to condition their pads to asphalt, and their heart and lungs need to get in shape.

My rule of thumb is two blocks per 10 pounds of body weight per day, starting out. A 20-pound dog could go four blocks per day. You can do it one time or split it into two walks. You'd increase that 5 to 10 percent per week."

If Buster is overweight or has health issues, check with your vet before starting a walking program.

Besides being good for both of you, a walk is a special time to bond.

"You don't grow to love your treadmill, you don't cuddle up to your elliptical trainer or baby talk your free weights, and the stair-step machine is never going to look at you with adoring eyes," Becker says, "but when your training partner is a dog, you're destined to meet him at a richer, deeper level."

Kim Campbell Thornton is an award-winning author who has written many articles and more than a dozen books about dogs and cats. She belongs to the Dog Writers Association of America and is past president of the Cat Writers Association. She shares her home in California with two Cavalier King Charles Spaniels and one African ring-neck parakeet.
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Tips to help your pet trim down ...

The plethora of pet diet and exercise books offer lots of excellent tips on keeping your dog sleek and healthy ... **Here are some of the best:**

- If you have trouble resisting your dog's begging, switch to healthy treats that are low in calories and high in nutritional value ... for example: air-popped popcorn, apple slices, broccoli and carrots.

"Real Food for Dogs" by Arden Moore

- Accustom your pet to eating only at mealtimes. Ending free-feeding and on-demand feeding will help an overweight pet slim down more naturally and prevent your pet from getting bored with its food.

"The Whole Pet Diet" by Andi Brown

- Even 30 seconds of playing will rev up your pet's metabolism. Aim for short but frequent exercise breaks a couple of times a day until they become a habit.

"My Fat Cat" by Martha Garvey

- Walks don't have to be outdoors. You can exercise with your dog in small doses, even when you're inside. The next time you get a phone call, pick up your cordless phone and signal your dog to follow you as you walk from room to room.

"My Fat Dog" by Martha Garvey



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