



Keeping our dogs fit is an important part of maintaining their good health and ensuring that they have a good quality of life for many years to come. Canine obesity is a nationwide epidemic affecting over 50% of American dogs. Even worse, dogs affected by obesity are more prone to arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, and cancer. According to the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention (APOP), decreased life expectancy is also linked to obesity in pets, and unfortunately, among all pets that veterinarians ultimately classified as obese, many owners initially identify their dog's weight in the normal range.

As responsible pet parents, we want to do everything we can to keep our dogs active and exercised. We understand that unfit dogs may have added health concerns such as stress on their heart, lungs, liver, kidneys and joints, an increased risk of injury and/or overheating, worsened osteoarthritis, an increased risk of diabetes, and risk to organ system during surgery. Not only does paying attention to our dog's fitness keep them healthier overall, but we also can increase the number of years they are with us and their quality of life in being able to enjoy more of the activities that Dog Scouts offers.

ASSESSING WEIGHT: A healthy dog's ribs should be easily palpable, but not visible. When viewed from above the waist should be observable behind the ribs, and when viewed from the side the abdominal tuck of the waist should be evident as well. The tuck is more prominent in some breeds, but even in those where it is less prominent it should never be lower than the ribs or impossible to find. You may think that a dog with long flowing hair does not have a prominent waist tuck, but it is easily seen when something like a soft tape measure is put around the dog to pull the hair up and out of the way.

Be sure to review the "Assessing Your Dog's Weight" document that's found on our web site. If you believe that your dog is overweight, talk to your veterinarian before starting any fitness program. They may recommend that you build up exercise gradually and avoid high-impact activities until some excess weight has been taken off. You may want to review the information provided for the [K9 Nutrition](#) badge before beginning even if you believe your dog is at a healthy weight.

STARTING AN EXERCISE PROGRAM: Before starting an exercise program for your dog, it is important to evaluate the dog's current fitness level and recognize if your dog has any particular needs or risks. If you are concerned, you may want to discuss with a veterinarian how to start increasing your dog's activity.

Start keeping track of how much exercise your dog currently gets and notice the dog's muscle tone and physical condition. You will use this as a starting point. Make a goal to gradually increase the dog's activity weekly by about 10% each week. When you reach a desired level of fitness, plan to stay at that level of activity to maintain that fitness. It is important not to rush in too soon, as you will risk overexertion and injury. It is also important to build in 2 non-consecutive rest days – so perhaps instead of a run; you take the dog on a more casual walk in the neighborhood. This will not only help with muscle recovery but can prevent boredom by adding some variety to the exercise program.

To keep yourself motivated, start keeping a log so you can measure your progress. Note the type of exercise, the time spent performing it, and if applicable (and desired) the miles covered. Set goals and work towards them. Perhaps you want the dog to reach a specific weight, or to be able to run in a dog-



Dog Scouts of America K9 Fitness Training

K9 Fitness

friendly 5K in a couple months, or to log 50 miles hiking over the summer. Or you may wish to introduce Parkour or an active dog sport into your dog's regular activities.

TYPES OF EXERCISE: Any exercise that involves you interacting with your dog, and the dog (and perhaps you) getting a balanced workout can count toward the badge. Programs must incorporate stamina, strength, proprioception (body awareness) and flexibility. Possible examples of stamina building (aerobic) include approximately 15 minutes of exercises such as:

- Walking/hiking (if this gets the dog's heart/respiration rate up)
- Running/trotting (with you or next to a golf cart)
- Cycling
- Skijoring
- Swimming
- Fetch or frisbee
- Treadmill
- Restrained recalls
- Pulling a sulky-type cart or utility cart (if that is aerobic for the dog)

It is great if you can get a workout along with your dog, but if this is not possible, there are plenty of other ways you can help your dog get fit. Throwing a ball for your dog to fetch, accompanying the dog on a hike while in a motorized cart, encouraging the dog to walk on a treadmill, and playing various recall games can all get your dog moving even if you aren't able to. Whatever activities you choose, always be mindful of safety considerations – make sure your dog doesn't mindlessly chase a toy into a tree or branch, or fling himself into the air to catch a toy and not engage his body to safely land, or slide into the toy and damage digits or ligaments from stubbing toes on a root. Remember that you and your dog are a team, so in some way you both need to participate in the exercise session together. Watching your dog run and play with others at a dog park or in your back yard can be part of an exercise program but for our purpose, require no interaction with you. Any activity you log should be one where your dog is focused on you or happily checks in with you for continued fitness fun.

SAFETY: Our dogs are capable of great speed, endurance and strength, but they rely on us to keep them safe so it's important to build up skills over time. High drive dogs in particular are not good at self-limiting when it comes to exercise and may continue to exercise when hot, tired or injured. We have to be smart and recognize when it's time to stop exercising, even if the dog wants to continue. Be aware of hot or slippery surfaces, locations that may host predators, water with cyanobacteria or sharp rock or trash.

High-Impact Activities – Activities like Agility and Flyball put a lot of increased stress on a dog's joints. Overweight dogs and puppies should avoid these types of activities to reduce the chance of injury. Puppies around 12 months for smaller breeds and 1 ½ years for larger breeds are generally cleared to begin these types of activities if they are otherwise healthy.

Physical or Health Considerations – Be careful with older dogs and brachycephalic (short-muzzled) breeds as they are more prone to heat exhaustion. Know any structural limitations your dog may have and tailor your exercise plan appropriately. Dogs with a surgical history, or those with arthritis or hip



dysplasia should not go for long distance runs. Long-backed dogs should be monitored carefully, especially with any high-impact activities. For puppies, the guideline is five minutes of exercise for every month of the puppy's age, split the total time into 2 or more sessions throughout the day to minimize growth plate damage.

Equipment – Make sure any equipment you are using is appropriate for the activities you and your dog are doing. Padded, non-restrictive harnesses and waist belts are great for running and hiking, but head halters and no-pull harnesses must be avoided as they can impact the dog's range of motion.

Other Considerations – Take precautions when undergoing any exercise with your dog, just as you would for any other activity. Make sure you and your dog both have identification whenever you are away from home. Use reflective gear such as vests, harnesses and leashes to make both you and your dog visible in low light. At times you may find things like headlamps, booties, pad conditioners, and cooling coats may be appropriate depending on the conditions. Always have plenty of fresh water for both you and your dog when exercising.

WARM UP & COOL DOWN: Always allow 5-10 minutes for warming up before you set out to exercise and 5-10 minutes to cool down your dog after intense activity. Every warm up should include some type of activity, like simply walking to begin to raise the dog's heartrate. The process is then reversed when it's time to cool down.

Active stretches are important for both warm up and cool down. Examples include:

- Having the dog weave between your legs
- Lifting each paw high and waving
- Dancing on hind legs with front legs on your arm
- Doing a bow
- Curling head to touch hip on each side

Many of the tricks that we teach our dogs also can qualify providing that they move and stretch the dog's body. Any trick that used bouncy or jerky movements should be avoided. Passive stretches, where you manipulate the dog's body by gently flexing and extending the joints are great to use post-workout. Always use caution when doing passive stretching and stop if the dog objects to the movement or if you feel the muscles start to tense. Be sure joints remain in alignment and the stretch is steady and smooth, not jerky. Ideally, each stretch should be held for 15-30 seconds.

Additional information regarding passive and active stretching can be found with the information for the [DOGa Exercise](#) badge on our web site.

DURING EXERCISE: While participating in exercise, continually monitor your dog for any signs of pain or overheating. Pay attention to any changes in the dog's gait and inspect the pads of the dog's feet regularly for cracking or chafing. Also check the areas that may be covered by a harness for chafing. Make sure that you and the dog stay hydrated. Be sure to follow any rules of the road, trail, or the area that you are using, and be courteous of other users. Dogs that are on leash do not need to be heeling during exercise but should not be lunging or dragging you excessively. Pulling is encouraged for activities



such as skijoring, sledding, or even biking but it should be under control with the dog wearing the appropriate harness for the sport, and should not present a danger to either of you.

OVERHEATING: One of the most serious risks for a dog when performing exercise is overheating. It is important to recognize the signs of over-heating and know how to respond. Please review the “Preventing Heat Stroke” document before exercising with your dog.

STRENGTHENING AND PROPRIOCEPTION: Other important aspects of overall canine fitness are strengthening and body awareness (proprioception). It’s important to include exercises that develop and maintain these skills in order for the dog to be able to safely and efficiently use his body and to prevent injury.

Strength building exercises use things like exercise balls, eggs or peanuts, discs, wobble boards, platforms or even hills to build core and extremity muscles important for fitness. These exercises also improve a dog’s balance, allowing him to be more agile. The exercises include things like having the dog balance on a properly inflated and sized inflatable, working with two paws on and two off of a wobble board, lifting one or both front legs while balancing on a disc, or having the dog perform a series of uphill recalls. Be aware of limb positioning and use, i.e. that the dog’s joints are properly aligned and weight is evenly balanced.

Proprioception exercises help to improve agility by helping the dog to better understand his body placement. Improving body awareness can also build a dog’s confidence for sports like agility or flyball. Examples of these types of exercises include having the dog walk or trot through a ladder or poles scattered on the ground, performing a series of low cavaletti jumps in different patterns and with varying distances between the jumps, perch exercises where the dog pivots his rear feet around with his front feet on a perch, and backing up to a target with rear feet on cue.

Complete information on strength building and proprioception exercises can be found in the information provided for our [DOGa Exercise](#) badge. We recommend that you review this information prior to starting any of these exercises with your dog. Additionally, there are many excellent books, programs and videos available online to help you better understand these types of exercises including those by *Chris Zink* and *Debbie Gross-Saunders*.

OTHER IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS: In addition to keeping your dog well hydrated before, during and after exercise, it’s important to feed him a diet that will provide the food he needs for exercise. Since you also want to keep your dog’s weight in check, you don’t want to overfeed. Complete information on dog food and various diets please see the information provided for our [K9 Nutrition](#) badge.

Massage is another tool that can enhance your dog’s fitness routine. Massage can be very therapeutic for your dog post-exercise and it is also a great way to further build the human-canine bond. As with passive stretching, if something hurts your dog or he reacts by pulling away during massage, stop immediately and assess the area. If this is a new reaction from your dog, he may have injured himself in some way during your exercise session and may need to be evaluated by a veterinarian. Full instruction on massage techniques can be found in the information we provide for our [K9 Massage](#) badge.