



PETS

## WALK THIS WAY

Take Fido for a stroll without taking a tumble.  
(It happens. A lot.)

BY DANA McMAHAN

**THE LAST THING** on your mind when you're getting your little buddy ready for his evening walk? Potential injuries. Because he's the goodest boy, and just look at that toofy smile! But according to research from Johns Hopkins University, dog-walking-related emergency room visits (for the humans) have quadrupled in the last 20 years, with women and older adults most at risk (thanks for nothing, lower bone strength!). Pet parents get pulled too hard or trip, then suffer from sprains, fractures, and even traumatic brain injuries.

There are a few factors behind this alarming trend. For starters, walking is America's favorite exercise. Also, high-energy breeds (we're looking at you, huskies and labs!) are very popular, says Nicole Ellis, a certified professional dog trainer with Rover, a network of pet sitters and walkers. And the U.S. population is living longer, so more older folks are going out for strolls. Yet according to some research, only 8% of dog parents enroll their pups in obedience training. Consider some classes for Snarls Barkley! And in the meantime, use these tips to keep everyone's paws planted firmly on the ground.

### Do Some Basic Training

You know it's coming: "Who's walking who?" It's a joke people often make when they see a rowdy pup dragging their person down the street. That pulling is a canine instinct, says Brian Collins, DVM, senior lecturer at Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. "Dogs' ancestors were predators," he says. "They're built for chasing their prey. They don't just amble along." Being on a leash isn't natural for dogs,

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he explains, so they pull to get what they want—more walking, more sniffing. When we let them, we just reinforce the behavior, and they continue to pull.

The solution? Train your dog to walk next to you and, whenever possible, to look at *you*—instead of, say, squirrels and other dogs. “This starts with walks in controlled environments, beginning inside your home and then a backyard,” Ellis says. Reward your dog with something soft and stinky every time he makes eye contact with you. Slowly introduce him to more distracting environments (from your yard, transition to a quiet neighborhood, then a more bustling setting). When he does pull, you should stop or turn around so he has to return to you—and have a treat at the ready!

### Gear Up with the Right Stuff

Even when they’re small or young, dogs can be a lot stronger than us. The proper equipment can help rein in pulling tendencies. Experts agree that retractable leashes are a no-no. They give dogs more freedom to roam, and that can encourage the problematic behavior you’re trying to stop. (Not to mention they’re dangerous, Ellis warns. The leash can break free easily, and if you drop the whole thing, it can become a scary chunk of plastic hurling at your dog.) Instead, use a fixed-length leash of four to six feet, Ellis says. Slide your hand through the loop and hold on to the leash. “With the other hand, you can hold a spot on the leash closer to the dog,” she adds. Never wrap the leash around your hand or wrist, as that’s a good way to get hurt. Many experts also

recommend a harness instead of a collar to prevent damage to your dog’s neck and trachea.

Think about what you’re wearing too, says Devin Trachman, a doctor of physical therapy and the clinic director of Physical Therapy Central in Edmond, Oklahoma. Be smart about your footwear. “Please don’t wear flip-flops. And make sure you have your phone with you,” she says, in case something happens and you need to call for help. If you’re walking at night, stick to well-lit areas, bring a flashlight, and put something reflective on both of you.

### Find the Best Walking Partner

Ideally, your dog fits your lifestyle and abilities, Collins says. “If you’re not that active, it’s probably not a good idea to adopt a border collie,” he says. “If you can easily pick up your dog, it’s probably a dog you can safely walk on a leash.” That doesn’t mean you shouldn’t get a larger dog, Collins adds, but he’ll definitely need proper leash training.

And give yourself a gut check. You may be taking a literal walk in the park, but the demands on your body are real. It requires balance and core strength to quickly recover from sudden shifts in weight or direction on the other end of the leash, Trachman says. “If you’re not quite there, maybe ask a friend to join you on a walk,” she says. Or lean on dog-walking services.

No matter what, put your phone down and keep your eyes peeled; watch your dog’s body language, look ahead for trip hazards, and stay aware of your surroundings. You never know what can happen out in the exciting world, and your number one job on these walks is to keep your pup—and yourself!—safe. ■

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