

6 Important Things To Know Before You Run With Your Dog

By Nancy Heslin Published Aug. 15, 2016 Updated Aug. 15, 2016

The sun is shining, there's not a cloud in the sky and you're having the run of your life—except your running partner won't stop yakking. No need to go barking mad; for the ideal fitness buddy, look no farther than the end of your leash.

"The love a canine has for you will always make him happy to be by your side," says Nadia Ruiz, whose midweek run with her 8-year-old Lab, Max, and boxer Bruno, 6, covers anywhere between 8 and 12 miles. "Dogs don't care what time of day it is, how long or where you run; they are simply happy to go running with you."

Nearly 55 percent of American households have a dog as a pet, according to the American Pet Products Association (APPA), and they can be trained to be excellent running companions. Sweating while your pet pants offers a myriad of benefits for both parties, including a reduced risk of heart disease and increased life expectancy. "Just like their owners," says Cari Setzler, doctor of veterinary medicine and running trainer for Fast Finish Coaching outside Chicago, "pooches are prone to both weight gain—52 percent of dogs in the U.S. are considered overweight or obese—and arthritis, with one in five over the age of 5 suffering from mobility issues."

But before signing up for this month's Canine Classic Half Marathon in Montana or a Canicross, a British phenomenon sweeping the U.S. where you run off-road with your dog, give paws to these vital steps necessary to help turn your flabrador into a fitbrador.

On Your Barks

Get a clean tail of health from the vet before beginning any cardio-intensive program for your pet. A physical and diet assessment should be done, especially as over-nutrition for dogs is on the rise and this can contribute to the development of skeletal disease.

Like with any running newbie, increasing mileage gradually is key to avoiding injury. Start off with an easy 10- to 15-minute run, upping your time by no more than 10 percent each week. If your dog is overweight, stick to longer walks. "Start them slow," Ruiz advises. "Humans can tell you when something hurts or when you are going too fast or too often. Dogs won't and will do everything they can to please and stay with you. Learn to read their body language and signals as you progressively increase pace and/or distance."

When to run is equally important. With different cooling mechanisms than humans, dogs suffer from heat stroke more in April and May than any other months of the year. That's because temperatures as low as 70 degrees (which won't feel hot to a human) can lead to increased body temperature, excessive panting and drooling in your pet. Get to a vet immediately if you see any of these symptoms of heat stroke.

During the late spring and summer, schedule your runs in early morning or late evening. There are some exceptions: Breeds like Rhodesian ridgebacks and fox terriers can run in warm weather successfully. Wait until cool weather hits to aim for a FB (Fur-sonal Best).

Is Your Pup Up?

Breed disposition plays an important role, as not all dogs are born to run. Brachycephalics, shortnosed, flat-faced breeds, like pugs, bulldogs and Shar Peis, may face breathing obstructions, while longcoated breeds may have a high level of difficulty breathing during warm weather (conversely, shorthaired dogs aren't thrilled about winter). Labs, beagles and English setters are good for distances up

to 10K, but if you want to spend more quality time with your pet, huskies, Goldendoodles, Weimaraners and Vizslas enjoy 10-mile-plus distances. Medium-sized dogs tend to make great runners, but German shorthaired pointers and Whippets will produce a 7-minute mile; Catahoulas and Dalmatians prefer a slower pace for the long haul.

No matter the breed, you shouldn't start running with a dog until the 1-year mark (or, for larger dogs, 2) as their joints are still developing and thus prone to injury. On the other end of the spectrum, your pet can remain active for a long time, and older age should not be a deterrent. Keep in mind that high-energy dogs don't always translate into easily trainable ones, which can pose issues when hitting the trails together. A Jack Russell will never tire but is instinctively a hunter, so she will be hard to control, even on a leash.

Lead Time

Fixed-length leashes of about two feet provide superior control, and the more colorful (aka visible) the better. A mechanical waist leash is best for trained dogs that know to leave distractions alone, such as Golden retrievers, Labradoodles and Border Collies, but the point is...it's best not to run with your dog off-leash.

Good control and general obedience make essential pre-leash behavior. "Sit,' 'stay' and 'heel' are key commands to learn before you make your dog your running partner," Setzler suggests. "You want to have leash safety, so practice with your pet next to you on a leash, on the same side. Eventually, signal a left and right turn, so the dog knows in advance the direction you are going."

Fido Fuel

No one likes running on a full stomach. Give your dog at least two hours to digest a meal before hitting the streets. Take a doggie water bottle for the run, and learn how much liquid your dog needs. Don't over-hydrate afterward. Larger dogs especially will bloat if they start lapping up endless supplies of H₂O. Allow only 1 cup for every 30 pounds and then smaller amounts every 15 minutes after until your dog is no longer thirsty.

"I always carry a hydration pack with me, regardless of how long or short we go on the trails," Ruiz says. "As we run in remote areas in the mountains, I carry ample water, at least one liter, a handheld, a couple pieces of meat and biscuits. Just like humans, dogs need to replenish their fluids and calories."

Ready, set, gotta go? Take poop bags too, and clean up after your dog.

First Aid Station

When running on trails, make sure your dog's up to date on tick medicine and check out the route ahead of time to see about other hazards. If you're sticking to the sidewalk or streets, remember that pavement is hard on little paws and, if hot, can cause blisters. Try to stick to soft, cool surfaces and examine your dog's feet post-run for cuts or sores. Consider booties for rocky trails, hot sidewalks or frozen ground to protect against abrasion, frostbite and salt (plus they look adorable).

It's advisable to carry a first-aid kit when running with your pet for longer distances. "Keep your vet and/or your local emergency number on hand," Setzler recommends, "as well as the Animal Poison Control Center (888-4ANI-HELP), plus a copy of your dog's medications, vaccination history and any medical conditions."

Setzler says the following five items should stay in your kit:

- Gauze for wrapping wounds or muzzling your injured dog
- Nonstick bandages to control bleeding or protect wounds
- Adhesive bandage wrap to secure gauze or dressings
- Tongue depressor to act as a splint (Note: A poorly placed splint can cause more harm and pain than help, so when in doubt, leave it unsplinted.)
- Bottle of water for rinsing wounds and drinking
- Remember, this is not a substitute for medical assistance. Take your dog to a vet as soon as possible.

Training Treats

Reward your running partner with post-workout recovery. With three Paradise4Paws locations in Chicago, Dallas/Fort Worth and Denver, you can choose from pawdicures, hot oil treatments, mud baths or a paddle in a boneshaped swimming pool (a triathlon next?). Prices vary. paradise4paws.com