

Do Dogs Really Need to Run Free?
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Jan is concerned that her Labrador retriever Tucker isn't getting enough exercise. Jan and Tucker live in an apartment and Jan gets him out for walks four or five times a day. Sometimes Jan goes to a nearby field and lets Tucker run off-leash. Recently, Jan got a citation from animal control for having Tucker off-leash in the field. Jan is upset with the citation because she believes Tucker needs to run free.

Do dogs need to run free? Clearly, dogs don't "need" to run free to survive. The inability to run free hasn't caused the death of any dog that we know about. Dogs certainly need some exercise to stay fit and healthy. Exercise is likely good for mental health as well, and may help with some behavior problems such as boredom-caused destruction.

The amount of exercise individual dogs need varies with the breed of the dog, the size and age of the dog, how the dog has been raised and the environment to which she has become acclimated. An older Chihuahua used to living in an apartment may need only an occasional walk or playtime in the house. A young border collie may need considerable exercise. A Labrador retriever used to lots of activity during hunting season will require supplemental exercise in the off season.

Individual differences within a breed exist as well. Our female Dalmatian, Ashley, needs lots of exercise and will race around in the backyard when she needs to, while our male, Mocha, is more content to watch from the deck.

Letting dogs run off-leash in open areas isn't the only way to give them exercise. Playing fetch or even tug-of-war (with certain rules) can be done in the backyard. Find the hidden object can be mentally and physically challenging for dogs and can be done inside. Swimming, on-leash running and walking, and biking with your dog using a device that safely attaches your dog to a bike are other possibilities.

Intense exercise can be potentially harmful so it's always a good idea to get your veterinarian's input when deciding what, and how much, exercise is best for your dog. Dogs don't have as efficient mechanisms for keeping cool as we do, so be especially careful in hot weather. Blistered and torn pads are the result when dogs run or hike too far on rough or hot surfaces. We admit to making this mistake with Ashley last summer.

If you allow your dog off-leash in open areas, do so responsibly. Only use areas approved for this use, use them only if your dog is friendly, healthy and current on her vaccinations, and if you have good verbal control of your dog. Obey leash laws. Dogs being walked on leash often don't appreciate a loose dog rushing up to them. This often results in fights.

Don't feel guilty if you aren't, or can't, give your dog the opportunity to run free. There are many other ways to meet her need for exercise.