

# 10 Ideas to Help Keep Your Dog in Shape

By Kathleen M. Reilly

After a long winter indoors, we're all ready for spring so we can get out and start moving. If we're being honest, most of our scales may be showing an extra pound or two we probably want to lose. And our canine companions are no different—several months of inactivity may have made her lose her peak fitness level too. It's just as important for dogs to maintain an ideal weight and avoid obesity as it is for us (turn to the article on page 22 to learn more about why this matters).

But here's the good news: There's probably no fitness companion more eager than your dog, so head outdoors and help her get in shape!

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN

If you've ever started a fitness routine, you know it often begins with eagerly gearing up and jumping in with gusto—and ends with every muscle in your body aching, or worse, with you injured. Your dog is no different. She's going to need to ease into a higher level of activity—especially if she's spent the winter as a warm couch potato buddy. Even dogs who have continued to be physically active need to be gradually introduced to a new activity or intensity level.

Get her cleared for activity with a visit to the vet. While you're there, ask your veterinarian for suggestions too—he or she will most likely have some great ideas based on your dog's individual fitness level, overall health, and age.

To help ensure your pup's fitness program is safe:

- **Set a specific amount of time when you start a new activity.**

You may be in better shape than your dog; just because you can easily make that 3-mile hike doesn't mean your dog can start out with that distance. So, keep your first outings short. You can gradually increase duration over time, depending on how your dog is handling the activity.

- **Keep the pace down.** Although your pup may be excited about a new activity or setting, don't let her natural exuberance get out of hand. She could get injured by pushing herself too hard and not even realize it. Play referee, and keep things fairly calm at first until you're positive she's able to handle a higher level of exertion.
- **Keep an eye on your dog to make sure she's OK.** If your dog is lagging

behind, breathing heavily, or otherwise struggling to keep going, it's time to head home and decrease the duration and intensity of the next outing. Similarly, if your pup seems sore or stiff the next day, it's best to cut back. Give your vet a call if you have any concerns at all.

**Your vet can help guide you by giving you weekly fitness goals for your dog to meet.**

## GET THE FUN STARTED!

Once your dog has your vet's approval, it's time to get out and start moving! Here's a list of ideas to get started:

**1 Play dates.** Dog parks are fun, but they may be too rowdy and overwhelming to some pups. Arrange a play date with a friend whose dog is about the same size and energy level as yours. If one of you has a fenced yard, meet there and let the pups run and tumble under your watchful supervision. Be sure both pets are up-to-date on vaccines before you set up your date.

**2 Backyard agility.** You don't need fancy equipment to do dog agility (although you can certainly purchase



it if you and your dog fall in love with the sport). In your fenced-in backyard, set up gallon jugs filled with water to weigh them down, spaced equally apart in a line, and guide your dog to “weave” through them. Or, if your dog is small enough, try using a child’s collapsible tunnel and gently encourage your dog to run through it. Set up other obstacles for her to step over or around, all with your encouragement. Don’t force her to do anything she’s afraid of—introduce each obstacle slowly and with lots of praise. If the weather isn’t cooperating or you don’t have a fence, you can always take this activity indoors if you have the space.

**3 Train for charity.** There are many charity 5K walk or run events that allow you to bring your dog. When you find one, begin training for it well in advance to make sure your pup is able to comfortably go the distance. Build her up in small increments, and be sure she’s on a leash and well hydrated the day of the big event.

**4 Team up.** Get out a soccer ball and join her in a fenced area for a one-on-one game. Let her chase, tackle, and push the ball as you gently kick it around. Be sure to keep an eye on her whereabouts before kicking, though, to avoid any injuries to either of you.

**5 Swimming.** If you’ve got a lake, pond, or pool nearby that’s free of undercurrents and is safe, try swimming with your pup. Keep in mind that not all dogs love water or inherently know how to swim. Avoid rushing into it—pick a quiet spot with shallow water, and encourage her with a toy, or call her to you. Always be sure she’s wearing a buoyant vest as well. For dogs

with joint pain, swimming can be a great exercise solution.

**6 Rollerblading.** Is your dog a fast runner? Sometimes jogging isn’t enough. Strap on a pair of rollerblades and try rolling along with your dog as she runs. Be sure to watch her for signs of fatigue, and make sure she’s solid on good leash manners before you start.

**7 Geocaching.** Why just hike with your dog, when you can go treasure hunting with her? With geocaching, participants all over the world hide “caches,” or boxes, some filled with small prizes (others are simply for fun). Go to [www.geocaching.com/guide](http://www.geocaching.com/guide) to learn more and get the coordinates to caches near you. You simply plug them into your phone’s GPS, and off you go! Your dog will get exercise by hiking with you and may even catch on that you’re searching for something—and actually help sniff the boxes out! Depending on the difficulty and terrain ratings, geocaching can involve a long, sometimes intense hike, so make sure you and your dog are prepared for the trip. When first getting started, consider searching for easier caches. One other note of caution: You won’t know what you’ll find before you open the cache, so keep it out of reach of your dog until you’re sure it’s dog friendly. Then you can let your pup have a sniff as a reward.

By preparing and taking things slowly, you and your dog can enjoy a spring full of outdoor activities that can not only keep you both in shape, but help create a solid bond for the whole year too.

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## Rainy Day? Keep Up the Momentum!

*Don't let bad weather stop your dog's fitness fun. Try these simple ways to help keep her moving:*

**8 Play hide and seek.** Have your dog sit and stay (or have a helper distract her) while you quietly find a place to hide. Then call your dog to come find you!

**9 Work on obedience.** Clear some space, and help your pup brush up on basic commands. If you work on recalls, she’ll be able to run across the room to you to get her heart pumping. Just be sure you’re rewarding her with affection, not treats, or you may derail your dog’s fitness goals.

**10 Dance!** Clear a safe area, turn on some music, and work some simple obedience moves into a canine-and-human dance routine.

