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6 Ways to Prevent Dog Walking Injuries

The right equipment, training and footwear can prevent falls and fractures

By Matt Alderton, AARP
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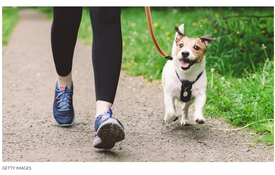

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Jerome Enad usually walks each of his three dogs — American Staffordshire terriers Sugar and Mr. Bones, and Froyo, a boxer mix — separately. One fateful day in 2022, however, he decided to walk all three together while his wife was away.

"Some days you have less energy than others, so I just wanted to get their walks out of the way," says Enad, 57, of Pensacola, Florida. "That was a bad decision."

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That's because Enad's dogs have a nemesis: a neighbor dog whose presence sends them into a tizzy. Enad often anticipates potential confrontations and crosses the street to avoid them. On this particular day, however, his dogs saw the animal antagonist first.

"The three of them with their combined weight were too much. Once they all got excited, it happened so fast," says Enad, who tried to hold his ground as his dogs darted for their target. "My heels started skidding, and I landed on my butt and my back. Then they started pulling me across the sidewalk until I was able to brace my foot against something — a tree, maybe, or a gutter. That's when I wrenched my knee."

Enad's experience isn't unusual. Dog walking injuries are most common among adults ages 40–64 and are most serious among adults 65 and older, according to a recent study from Johns Hopkins University.

Enad, who happens to be a retired orthopedic surgeon, had sprained the medial collateral ligament in his right knee. Although he was limping for weeks, he recovered with rest.

It could have been much worse. And for many older adults — almost 4 in 10 of whom have a dog — it often is.

Beware of falls and fractures

From 2001 to 2020, 422,659 adults sought treatment in U.S. emergency rooms for injuries sustained while walking leashed dogs, according to the April study from researchers at Johns Hopkins University. Many more injured dog walkers probably sought treatment with primary care doctors and specialists, according to Ridge Maxson, one of the study's authors and a fourth-year medical student at Johns Hopkins University.

Older adults' most common injuries from dog walking are traumatic brain injuries and hip fractures, the study notes. Compared with younger dog walkers, older people are three times more likely to experience a fall while walking a leashed dog, more than twice as likely to sustain a fracture and 60 percent more likely to sustain a traumatic brain injury.

"For older adults, the most common injuries we found are two of the most debilitating and life-changing injuries that older adults can experience," says Maxson, who blames age-related declines in balance, bone density, gait, muscle strength and vision. Hip fractures in older adults can limit mobility and overall independence, he says, adding that 15 percent to 36 percent of older adults who experience a hip fracture die within a year of their injury.

"As for traumatic brain injury, it's been linked in older adults to enduring cognitive and psychosocial impairments, and a history of traumatic brain injury in addition to normal age-related brain changes may actually accelerate cognitive decline," he says.

Tips for safer dog walking

The takeaway isn't that older adults shouldn't own dogs, Maxson insists. Rather, it's that they should take proactive steps to minimize the risk of injury if they do. For example:

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1. Build resilience

You can make yourself more resistant to accidents by taking proactive measures in consultation with your doctor, Maxson says. If you're at high risk for falls and fractures, your physician might prescribe supplements or medications to help with bone strength.

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Your doctor also can help you create an exercise plan. "Older dog walkers, specifically, should consider performing resistance and balance exercises to build muscle and improve coordination," Maxson says. "Both of these have been shown to reduce the incidence and severity of falls in older adults."

2. Choose the right dog

Though it's never a good idea to judge dogs solely based on breed or appearance instead of individual behavior and temperament, it's important that older adults consider getting dogs that complement their lifestyle and physical abilities, says certified veterinary technician Kait Hembree, head of training at online dog training company GoodPup.

"I think it really comes down to the energy level of the dog in front of you. If you're going to get something energetic — whether it's smaller or larger — you need to make sure you have the resources to give it extra exercise and extra mental stimulation," notes Hembree, who says older rescues might be more manageable than puppies for some people because they tend to be less hyper and often require less training.

3. Be strategic

Walks are safest when they're carefully considered and planned, according to George Melillo, cofounder and chief veterinary officer of Heart + Paw, a veterinary practice with 28 locations in 10 states. "Being mindful and taking a few precautions can be very helpful," he says.

According to Melillo and Hembree, important considerations include:

- **Footwear:** Wear solid shoes with good traction — no sandals or flip-flops, which can easily slip.
- **Route:** Routinely walking the same path helps orient both dog and owner. The more familiar the route, the fewer triggers there are for your dog and the fewer tripping hazards there are for you.
- **Time of day:** If you have poor vision, avoid evening walks in poorly lit areas. Likewise, if you have an anxious or excitable dog, it might be best to walk when there are fewer noises and distractions, such as early morning when others are in bed or midday when neighbors are at work.

Because tired dogs are typically easier to handle, another strategic move is scheduling playtime before walks. "People think walking the dog is the only way to expend their energy and get in their daily exercise needs," says Rover.com veterinary medical adviser Rebecca Greenstein, chief veterinarian and practice owner at Kleinburg Veterinary Hospital in Toronto. "But playing ball in the backyard or playing with them around the house also can tire them out so they don't start out a walk with a lot of pent-up energy."

If you don't have a yard, you can rent one using apps such as Sniffspot, which allows you to reserve private spaces — yards, fields and indoor dog parks — by the hour for safe, off-leash fun with your pet.

"If there aren't Sniffspots available near you, get creative," suggests Hembree, who says church parking lots (which may be empty during the week) and unused tennis courts can be good places for off-leash exercise if the area is fenced and your dog will come when called. However make sure you have permission to use those spaces and be mindful of how others might perceive your activities.

4. Buy the right equipment — and use it correctly

The right leash and collar can make a big difference, according to Greenstein, who advises against retractable leashes. "As convenient as they are, they're not ideal for safety or for training your dog because they allow them too much freedom," she says. "Stick with a nonretractable, traditional 6-foot leash. It discourages pulling, and you are a lot less likely to get tangled."

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Grip also matters. "Holding the leash in the palm of the hand and instead of wrapped around the fingers or wrist allows for greater control of the dog and the ability to loosen or tighten one's grip if the dog begins to pull away," Maxson says.

Instead of a collar, Greenstein recommends a harness. "Walking a dog on a standard collar puts a lot of traction on their neck," she says, adding that you should attach your leash to the front clip of the harness instead of the rear clip. "The front clip helps discourage pulling the most, whereas the back clip can inadvertently encourage pulling because it allows them to leverage their own body weight."

Because they use negative instead of positive reinforcement, Hembree discourages shock collars, prong collars and choke chains. For dogs who are especially stubborn or easily startled, she says owners might consider a martingale collar that discourages lunging by getting comfortably tighter when the dog pulls.

5. Invest in training

Dogs can learn to be good walkers, according to Hembree, who says owners can work with trainers virtually or in person to teach their dogs basic commands such as "heel" and "watch me." The former encourages dogs to walk calmly at your side while the latter gets them to focus on you instead of distractions.

For owners who lack the time and resources for training, Hembree offers several walking "hacks." If your dog loves fetch, for example, consider carrying a ball; if you encounter a distraction, holding up the ball can encourage the animal to focus on you. You can also carry treats and toss them on the ground periodically to engage your dog's natural foraging instincts, which will simultaneously slow it down, calm it and distract it from external stimuli.

6. Stay off electronic devices

Try not to focus on your cellphone, a fitness tracker or a smartwatch while out walking your pet. If you're looking at a device, it's easy to trip on uneven pavement, not realize another dog is headed your way or fail to realize the leash has gotten tangled in your pup's feet.

Focusing on your dog — and only your dog — is crucial, according to Greenstein. "Make sure your cellphone isn't a distraction," she says. "If you're texting or on the phone, you may not see the squirrel dart across the road that your pup may lunge for, or notice other potentially hazardous situations."

It's always best to keep your phone in your pocket and dedicate attention to your pet, Greenstein says.

Given the risk of injury, older pet parents might be tempted to take fewer walks. What's often healthiest, however, is actually more walks, according to Melillo, who says dog walking done safely provides dogs and owners alike with much-needed physical exercise and social engagement.

"Some of the behavioral issues dogs can have is because they're under-exercised and under-stimulated," he says. "So if you can take walks in a way that's safe for both of you, that's ideal for everyone."

Matt Alderton is a contributing writer who specializes in health and wellness, travel and technology. His work has also appeared in USA Today, Forbes *and* The Washington Post.

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