

WHY THE BEST EXERCISE BUDDY IS A DOG

Health secrets I've learned from my four-legged workout partner.

by **Carol Krucoff**

Illustrated by **Albert Staehle**

My father put on five pounds the summer after our cocker spaniel, Budgie, died. Without the family pet's need for an after-dinner walk, Dad stopped taking his nightly, 45-minute stroll around the neighborhood. Within a few months, his waistline expanded.

I remembered this recently when I saw a friend who'd been trying to lose weight for years and discovered that he'd finally managed to shed ten pounds. How?

"Got a dog," he said. "We walk three miles every morning."



A dog will see to it that you exercise daily on schedule, and if you follow his example, you may learn some simple lessons about living a healthy life.

Fitness experts regularly advise people to work out with a buddy, because studies show that those who exercise with a partner are more likely to stick with their program. But while the research considers only human exercise pals, I'm certain the conclusions could extend to canine companions as well. Dogs provide wonderful camaraderie and motivation to be active, while adding an extra measure of safety and a huge serving of fun. And unlike a human workout buddy, your dog will never cancel on you at the last minute or bore you with obscure details of an intricate business deal.

Plus, dogs are excuse proof. Even the best-intentioned exerciser can find a rationale for hitting the snooze alarm rather than lacing up the walking shoes. But it's nearly impossible to turn off an excitedly wagging tail or to ignore the wet, sloppy kisses of a pooch pining for a morning jaunt. Even when the electricity goes out and your treadmill is powerless, your dog keeps on moving. No batteries required.

And few incentives to get moving are as powerful as the threat of household destruction if you are foolish enough to throw the covers back up over your head.

Rain or shine, hot or cold, the dog is an animal that must be walked—and so, health experts now know, is the human. America's epidemic of inactivity is responsible for an estimated 250,000 deaths per year, warn public health officials, who say that simply walking for 30 minutes a day can dramatically reduce the risk of disease.

And few personal trainers are as successful in helping people adopt the habit of walking daily as "man's best friend."

Even regular exercisers can add a new dimension to their workouts with a dog. Although I've been hooked on my morning run for years, it's become even more fun in the year since our family got Sheba the Beagle. Sheba's shaken up my old routine—a 30-minute jog around the high-school track—since she can't abide merely running in circles and refuses to wait patiently for me while I do. So now I tackle something I once hated. We run hills. Up and down our hilly neighborhood, Sheba and I run several miles, stopping frequently to sniff for squirrels (Sheba) and breathe deeply (me).

see *Exercise* on page 84

Exercise*continued from page 26*

I call them "Squirrel Sprints" because our intense bursts of chasing small creatures interspersed with slower strolling and sniffing is a form of interval training that actually has increased my speed. When we get to the high school, I tie Sheba's leash to the fence while I do sit-ups and push-ups at the par-course—a strengthening workout I'd often skipped when I used to run solo. Then we finish up with an all-out race home, where the winner—Sheba—gets the first drink of water.

Of course bringing a dog into your home is a serious responsibility. Unlike an expensive exercise machine, you can't stick a dog in a corner and use it as a clothes hanger when you get tired of it.

But in addition to being a fun way to activate your whole family, having a dog also provides some simple—but profound—lessons in leading a healthy life. Here, for example, are some health secrets I've learned from exercising with Sheba:

- **Greet everyone you meet**, but keep your ears cocked until you determine if it's friend or foe.

- **Lap up water** at every opportunity.

- **Enjoy nature in all her moods.** Walking in the rain or snow can be delightful. (Only a crazy human, however, would run in summer's midday heat.)

- **Stretch frequently**, especially when you've been sitting or lying down. The yoga pose called "Down Dog," which is modeled after a canine's favorite "paws forward, tail up" stretch, is an unparalleled way to remove kinks from the legs, back, and shoulders.

- **Live in the moment.** Don't brood over the past or worry about the future. Embrace whatever you're doing—running, eating, sniffing, sleeping—with your whole being.

- **Rely on more than just your eyes.** Smell, taste, touch, and hearing

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

are also important ways to sense the world.

- **Always take time to roll on the floor** and play.
- **Never be too busy to stop** and smell the rabbit holes. ✖