Puppies: How Much Exercise Is Too Much?

By Anna Burke

I’ll never forget the look my puppy obedience class trainer gave me when I told her proudly that my puppy had gone on a two-mile hike with me. As she explained, puppies, especially large-breed puppies, should not be exercised too much, as over-exercising could cause joint and bone problems, and two miles was definitely too much for my three-month-old dog.

While I never made that mistake again, it did leave me with a few questions. Just how much exercise is too much for a puppy, and how was I supposed to know when enough was enough?

Subject of Debate

There is a lot of debate in the dog world about puppies and exercise. Veterinarians, breeders, and trainers all seem to agree that too much exercise is just as bad as not enough, but there is no set formula for calculating your puppy’s progress.

While it would be nice if there were a 100-percent-accurate chart you could look at that broke down puppies by breed and age and explained how much exercise they needed each day, complete with mileage and a puppy Fitbit, the reality is more complicated.

Veterinarian Dr. Patty Khuly points out that some of this confusion stems from a combination of a lack of scientific studies, a variety of personal opinions, and the alarmist mentality of the Internet. She compares the debate about puppy exercise to the ongoing debate about exercise, sports, and children — there are many different approaches to exercise, and each has its ups and downs.

How Much Exercise Does Your Puppy Need?

We may not have exact measurements, but there are a few commonsense considerations that can help you come up with a plan to keep your puppy active and healthy.

For starters, consider your dog’s breed. A Bulldog puppy and a Border Collie puppy will both love playtime, but a Border Collie will probably have a higher exercise tolerance than a Bulldog, not to mention a higher heat tolerance for outdoor play.

Breed size matters, too. There have been studies that show potential links between too much exercise and orthopedic disease in large-breed dogs. Forcing your 8-week-old Great Dane for a two-mile walk every day, for instance, is probably not a great idea, even if he could keep up. Most people would not consider taking a smaller-breed puppy for a hike that long, but with higher energy levels, larger breeds can fool us into thinking they need longer walks than is good for them.

Learning as much as you can about your breed is a good place to start. Large and giant breeds grow quickly and mature slowly, which may mean you have to put off certain activities, like jumping in agility, until they are fully grown. Toy breeds, on the other hand, mature more quickly but require small, frequent feedings throughout the day as puppies, which can mean you may need to adjust their exercise accordingly.

All breeds require mental stimulation, but high drive, working breeds, such as Belgian Malinois, Border Collies, and German Shepherd Dogs need more mental stimulation than other breeds. Working training sessions into their exercise routine is just as important as exercise itself.

Your puppy’s exercise needs will change as she grows. When your puppy is young, veterinarians recommend keeping exercise limited to short walks and multiple play sessions throughout the day, with plenty of time for naps.

Older puppies will require more exercise. A six-month-old dog might be capable of taking longer walks or even short jogs (if your vet helps you determine he’s in good overall health and up for it), for example, but long hikes over rough terrain or strenuous agility classes are still potentially dangerous.

You can slowly build your puppy up to longer walks with time, taking plenty of breaks to keep him from tiring out or hurting himself, but how long is too long? And what about puppies that never seem to get tired, no matter how much they run around?

No Easy Answers

As with humans, all the recommendations in the world boil down to an inconvenient reality: the amount of exercise your puppy needs depend on your puppy.

“On the one hand, we know wolf pups run with their packs for miles. On the other, we know that the risks for a sedentary puppy with a weekend-warrior exercise pattern are worse than for a puppy that gets continuous, self-regulated exercise,” says Dr. Marc Wosar, MSpVM, DACVS, an orthopedic specialist. “Unfortunately, there are no hard-and-fast rules in these cases.”

This leaves owners struggling to come up with the answers themselves. Talking with your veterinarian is a great place to start, and Dr. Kuhly cautions against spending too much time focusing on “how much exercise is too much,” and instead advises owners to remember that while there are no fixed rules about what is too much exercise, not getting enough exercise over a lifetime is far more dangerous.

Your veterinarian is a great place to start your research. You can also talk to your breeder, contact breed enthusiast groups for advice, or talk to other owners about their experience with puppies of a similar breed. Most importantly, watch your puppy carefully for signs of excessive tiredness or lameness, as this could be more than just a symptom of too much exercise and could be a sign of a more serious problem.

Puppy Exercise Safety Tips

Regardless of your dog’s age, there are a few safety tips from the American Veterinary Medical Association that can help keep your puppy safe during exercise.

Teach your puppy how to walk on a leash.

Begin with short walks, taking frequent breaks.

Increase the length of the walk gradually.

Avoid walks during the hottest and coldest parts of the day.

Walk on safe footing, avoiding slippery or sharp surfaces.

Call your veterinarian if your puppy shows any signs of lameness.

Types of Exercise

Puppies love to play, whether that involves romping, chasing, wrestling, or tugging. This is good news for owners, because it provides lots of variety in exercise for their pups. Variety may also help reduce some of the risks associated with repetitive exercise and can help you bond with your new dog.

Consistency is important for puppies. Taking long runs on the weekend and short walks during the week can hurt your puppy’s growing body, but consistency does not mean you have to repeat the same activities. Vary the type of your puppy’s activities. If the weather is warm, try taking your puppy swimming to help get her used to water. Go for walks on different surfaces, like grass, wooded trails, and even pavement to help her grow comfortable in new environments. Find puppy playgroups and obedience classes and introduce her to new toys and games.

Above all, make sure she gets at least three exercise sessions a day. Two of these could be short walks around the neighborhood to work on her leash training, while the third could be a rousing game of tug in the yard or hide-and-seek in the house. As you get to know your dog, you may find that she tells you when she is too tired to keep playing, which is your cue to enjoy a few moments of peace and quiet while your puppy takes a nap.