

# Owning a dog encourages exercise in pregnant women

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The study of more than 11,000 pregnant women, in partnership with Mars Petcare, showed that those who owned dogs were approximately 50% more likely to achieve the recommended 30 minutes of exercise a day through high levels of brisk walking than those without dogs. Scientists suggest that as it is a low-risk exercise, walking a dog could form part of a broader strategy to improve the health of pregnant women.

Previous studies have shown that maternal [obesity](#) and large weight gain during pregnancy has adverse outcomes for mother and child. Studies show, for example, that obesity in pregnant women can result in difficult births and may also have implications for future obesity in the child. As a result, pregnant women, and those contemplating pregnancy, are advised to contact [health professionals](#) to manage their weight and exercise.

Recommended exercise during pregnancy includes walking, hiking, jogging and swimming, but many women prefer walking as their primary means of exercise. In the first study to investigate whether dog walking could help promote exercise in pregnant women, researchers anticipate the findings could be of value to [health experts](#) who offer advice on maintaining general fitness and [healthy eating habits](#) during pregnancy.

Dr Carri Westgarth, from the University's Institute of Infection and [Global Health](#), said: "Although the higher [physical activity levels](#) of adult [dog owners](#) has already been demonstrated in the US and Australia, this is the first study of its kind to examine whether the effects also apply to pregnant women.. By not managing their weight and exercise, pregnant women risk unnecessary weight gain, as well as a difficult labour or weight problems for the child in later life.

"We found that owning one or more dogs was associated with pregnant women taking part in [brisk walking](#) on a regular basis, helping them to

achieve the recommended 150 minutes of activity a week. Findings suggest that ownership of a dog provides some motivation to go for a walk, even during pregnancy.

"Dog walking alone cannot reduce the numbers of obese pregnant women, however, and we found no association between the weight of women with dogs compared to those without them. We also found that some pregnant women with dogs didn't go out walking. This means that we need to look at how promotion of dog walking could be integrated into a wider strategy, which includes advice on healthy eating, to encourage exercise during pregnancy and reduce weight gain.

"We now need to investigate why some people do not take up the health enhancing opportunity to walk their dogs regularly, and what barriers and motivators there are to walking. We also need to find out how factors such as the type of dog many affect the intensity of physical activity; for example whether owners with large dogs walk more briskly, compared to owners with small dogs. This will help us identify the advice health professionals could recommend to pregnant women for dog walking activity."

Dr Sandra McCune, Research Programme Manager at Mars Petcare, said: "Mars Petcare at WALTHAM® Centre for Pet Nutrition undertake a variety of research into benefits of pet ownership. We believe that owning a pet, and taking care of it properly, is hugely positive for the mental and physical wellbeing of the owner. This research shows that dog walking can form part of a healthy lifestyle for pregnant women, who may otherwise find it difficult to meet their exercise objectives."

Provided by University of Liverpool

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