



Importance of Regular Exercise for Your Pets

If you accept the responsibility of keeping a pet you must appreciate that, for most animals, regular exercise is very important for their well-being. To deny an animal the space and opportunity it needs to exercise can result in abnormal behavioural patterns as well as ill health. Reptiles and insects are a few of the species which prefer confined spaces and do not take the opportunity to exercise if allowed to do so.

Typical examples of pets being deprived of exercise are:

- dog owners who work all day and play at nights and weekends - without building an exercise period for their dog into their daily routine
- rabbits and guinea pigs that are kept confined to a cage or hutch all year round without access to an exercise run
- hamsters that are kept in a small cage and not provided with a wheel or an exercise ball, and
- birds without enough flight space in their cage.

Exercise is important as it allows our pets to express their normal instinctive behavioural traits including inquisitive exploration, the use of scent, sight and hearing, tracking, stalking, play-fighting, play-defensive behaviour, hiding, attacking, chasing, greeting members of the same species, dealing with strange objects and dealing with animals from different species. Exercise also encourages the development of a normal daily toilet routine. Cats and dogs deprived of regular exercise and confined to the home may develop anti-social behaviour patterns including destructive behaviour, aggressive territorial guarding, house soiling and vocalization when left alone without human companionship.

A degree of exercise (but not excessive exercise) is needed for normal muscular and skeletal development in young, growing animals. Animals deprived of exercise will develop poor muscle conformation (due to muscle atrophy) and a sedentary life-style which will predispose them to develop obesity and other disorders.

The most common adverse effect of insufficient exercise is obesity and all pets can develop this if they are fed too many calories. Millions of pet dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, rats, ponies and birds are obese simply because owners do not control calorie intake and provide insufficient exercise, or because they have encouraged or enforced the development of a sedentary lifestyle. Obesity has all sorts of negative effects on the body - and it can make various diseases worse (e.g. heart disease, orthopedic disease, skin disease). Obesity also plays an important role in the cause of some common diseases - including diabetes mellitus.





How much exercise should be given?

Given the opportunity most animals will regulate their own exercise, but it is important to encourage regular exercise from an early age - otherwise sedentary behaviour can be difficult to change once it



is established. Small pets should be given sufficient space in their home to be able to move around and they should be given access to exercise areas (e.g. runs) or exercise toys (e.g. wheels, balls)

Different breeds of dog require different levels of activity. Large and Giant Breed working dogs clearly require much more exercise than small lap dogs. Twice daily exercise periods - for at least 20 minutes duration - should be regarded as a minimum.

Where should exercise be given?

Owners of pets should show consideration for other members of society. Cats and dogs will both defecate and urinate during exercise periods so they should have their toilet behaviour controlled so that they defecate in places where the feces can be cleared up without causing unnecessary inconvenience to other members of the public. In urban areas and in public parks or on public beaches the exercise of dogs is usually controlled by local legislation and you should only exercise your pets where you are allowed to. This is because excretions from pets can present a significant zoonosis risk to humans.