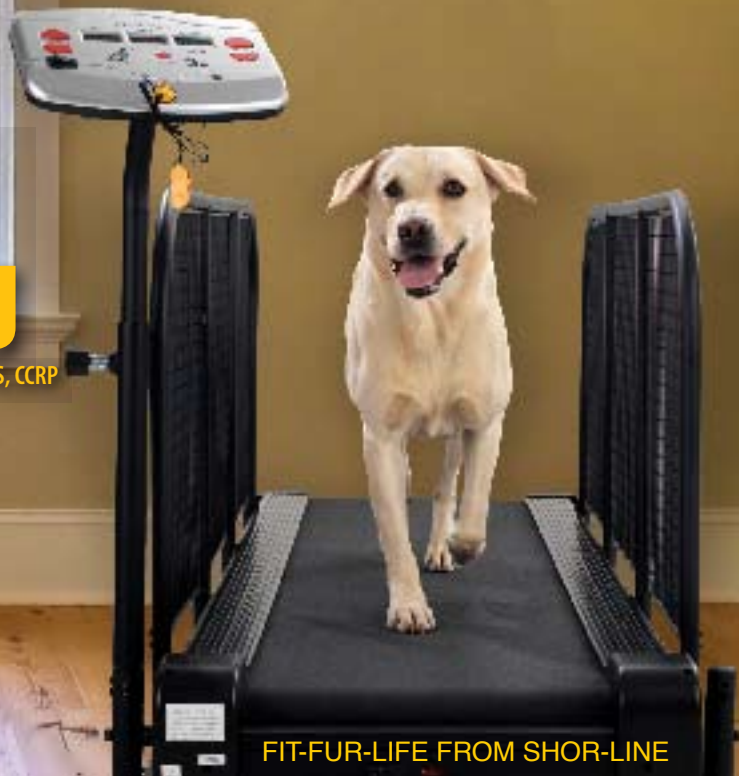




EXERCISE OF THE MONTH:

Treadmill Walking

By Debbie Gross Saunders DPT, MSPT, OCS, CCRP



FIT-FUR-LIFE FROM SHOR-LINE

A land treadmill is a useful tool for ourselves and our beloved dogs. With winter here, a treadmill allows us to maintain performance dogs' fitness level and provide physical exercise on a regular basis. Treadmill walking also provides an excellent cross-training activity for most other dogs in the household. For dogs that need to lose weight or older dogs that can only walk for short intervals of time, treadmill walking is a great solution to the problem of getting adequate exercise.

Note: Dogs under 15 to 18 months of age should not participate in treadmill activities due to their age and the potential damage to growth plates. In addition, dogs under 10 pounds may have a difficult time on the treadmill because of their short stride length, and using the treadmill could potentially cause damage to their musculoskeletal system. I prefer outdoor walks for smaller dogs rather than the land treadmill.

Choosing a Treadmill

The length of the belt of the treadmill is important because it will assist the dog in maintaining his natural stride length. The treadmill belt should be longer than your dog's stride length. For example, a German Shepherd with a stride length of 6.5' needs a treadmill with a belt that's 7' or longer.

A variety of treadmills are built specifically for dogs. Some are motorized and others are powered by the dog, or are classified as automatic. For more information on treadmills that are appropriate for your dog, visit www.shor-line.com, www.jogadog.com, or www.nordictrack.com. Dogs may also use treadmills designed for humans, and this is a great excuse for both you and your dogs to get moving! If you have a good quality human treadmill in the house already, this may be perfect for your dog. Just make sure that the belt length is appropriate for your dog's stride length.

When choosing a treadmill for your canine athlete, there are various features to consider. The first one is the motorized versus the automatic treadmill. The automatic treadmills rely on the dog's activity to move the belt and do not require electricity. These are less expensive than motorized treadmills, but motorized treadmills allow you to set the desired speed for the dog and simulate either a flat or an inclined surface. Some treadmills even allow you to decline the surface.

An incline feature on a treadmill allows you to focus more on the dog's hind limbs or rear-end strength, which is useful when working on hind-limb power. If the treadmill offers a decline, this feature will allow you to focus more on the dog's forelimbs or front legs and shoulders.

The ability to vary the belt speed is another important feature. Ideally, the treadmill should start at a slow speed (fractions of 1 mph) and increase to at least 5 mph. You want to start the dog off slowly, so a treadmill that can be run at 0.5 mph is ideal. Running or jogging on a treadmill is sometimes difficult to achieve if the treadmill does not reach speeds that are fast enough. The treadmill speed for running at a gallop would need to exceed 5 mph or 6 mph.

The treadmill should be sturdily built and offer enough shock resistance that stresses are not improperly placed on the dog's body.

An emergency switch to quickly turn off the treadmill is available on many models. This feature is important in case a quick stop is necessary.

When you set up your treadmill, make sure the front of it is not facing toward a wall. Most dogs will not walk directly toward a wall so it's important to have the treadmill facing an open area.

The Exercise

When starting your dog on a treadmill, the dog should be wearing a flat buckle collar or a harness. My preference is a harness. The dog should also be on lead. Some dog treadmills have clips so that you can secure the dog to the treadmill. If your treadmill does not have a clip, securely hold the dog's leash or harness and start the treadmill slowly, between 0.5 mph and 1 mph. Encourage the dog to focus by holding treats in front of his nose; string cheese works wonderfully because the dog can continuously nibble at it. The dog may take a few minutes to get used to the ground moving under his feet. Verbal encouragement as well as treats are beneficial. As the dog gets more comfortable, raise the speed to the desired gait pattern: a walk or a trot.

As regular exercise, you may use the treadmill on a daily basis for 5 to 20 minutes, depending on the dog's endurance level. If your dog has a weak body component, you can focus on strengthening that area with an incline or decline. For example, if the dog has a problem with his iliopsoas or a cranial cruciate ligament, you need to focus more on the hamstrings and gluteal region. Using a 10% to 15% incline at a walk for 10 to 15 minutes is ideal. You can discuss a treadmill program tailored to your dog's needs with your veterinarian or a canine rehab therapist.

Older dogs may only be able to walk 2-5 minutes and may require rest periods. For weight loss, the sessions may begin at 5 minutes secondary to the dog's condition and lack of endurance. Sessions may be performed twice a day initially until the dog is capable of 20 minutes of sustained activity.

To avoid a training plateau due to your dog's boredom with the exercise, vary both speed and time on the treadmill. Alternating between endurance and strengthening levels will provide an all-around workout for your dog.

- Endurance activities may include a trot for 15 to 30 minutes, depending on the dog's stamina.
- Strength activities include a slower pace at an incline for 10 to 15 minutes.
- Interval training is also beneficial and allows variations in speed. The intervals will vary between walking and trotting, or trotting and running, and the intervals can be anywhere from 30 to 90 seconds in length.

Some treadmills can be pre-programmed for various workouts that can be saved to be altered as your dog gains strength and endurance.

Following is an example of a week of treadmill training during the winter months.

- Monday: 15 minutes of trotting at 4 mph to 5 mph
- Tuesday: 20 minutes of interval training. Warm up 5 minutes at 3 mph. Vary intervals for 10 minutes: between 60 seconds at 5 mph and 60 seconds at 3 mph. Cool down for 5 minutes.
- Wednesday: 15 minutes of incline work; 10% incline at 3 mph
- Thursday: 30 minutes of endurance work at 4 mph
- Friday: Take a day off
- Saturday: 15 minutes of trotting at 4 to 5 mph
- Sunday: 20 minutes of interval training as above



Warm-up and Cool Down

Each treadmill session should begin with a warm-up and stretching activities. Also, the session should end with a cool down followed by stretching.

- The warm-up should consist of at least 5 minutes of a slow walk, on or off the treadmill, followed by light stretching of the major muscle groups.
- Begin the cool down with a slow, progressive reduction in speed on the treadmill. For example, if the dog has been trotting at 5 mph, slow the speed down to 4 mph for 1 minute, then 3 mph for another minute, 2 mph for a minute, and then 1 mph for a minute. Once the dog is off the treadmill, walk him around for a few minutes and finish with stretching.

A treadmill should not replace time spent with your dog, and if the weather allows, walks outside are favored. A treadmill does, however, offer an alternative for those rainy, snowy, and cold days, or for those handlers who do not have access to good walking areas. 🐾

Dr. Debbie Gross Saunders has worked with animals for over 15 years and is a certified canine rehabilitation practitioner and licensed physical therapist. Her clinic and training facility, Wizard of Paws, is located in Connecticut, and specializes in the performance dog. Visit her website at www.wizardofpaws.net or email her at wizofpaws@aol.com.

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