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The Joys and Dangers of Hiking With Your Dog



JEN REEDER

It's no surprise that environmental consultant Ali Baird loves hiking with dogs — she met her husband Nathan in 1995 when he was hiking with his Rottweiler, Ooo. Since then, she's been hiking throughout the mountains of California and Colorado with canine companions and loving every minute of it.

"It's fun for both of us — the dogs love it," Baird says. "The best hikes are the ones that have a treat at the end for the dogs, like a lake. That way, when you reach the end of the hike, they've got a place to play."

As the weather turns warmer, many nature lovers are getting ready to hit the trails with their dogs. Hiking with a dog is great exercise for both owner and pet, as long as certain precautions are taken, according to Wade Smith, DVM, co-owner of Community Pet Hospital in Firestone, Colo.

"The main thing is, don't overdo it — which also applies to us," Smith says. "If you haven't hiked for a year and you try to do 6 miles, you're going to get blisters on your feet, and dogs will, too. They'll come back and slough their pads and have to be in bandages for a week — it can be a mess."

To get your pooch in shape, Smith suggests starting with shorter hikes or taking walks to a neighborhood park. Walking on a sidewalk has the added benefit of naturally keeping a dog's nails from getting too long, which can hurt it.

Before heading out on a longer hike, Smith says that it's "a given" to be sure that your dog's vaccinations are current, to know the area's leash laws, and to know where the nearest emergency pet clinic is located (or to have a cell phone that will reach your veterinarian). Owners can spray their dogs with regular mosquito repellent — keeping it away from their eyes — and treat them with an anti-tick treatment.

Hiking early in the morning to avoid the heat of the day is a good idea, especially with dogs that have short faces, like pugs, Boston terriers, and bulldogs, which are more prone to being overheated, Smith explains. It's important to pay attention to your dog's condition on trails.

"Most dogs, if they start getting tired and falling behind, slow down," Smith says. "They'll tell you if you're listening."

More Information:

www.Gorp.com
(search > "hiking with dogs")

www.Moabpets.org
(click on "pet tips")

www.Mc2sar.org
(click on "tips for hiking safely with your dog")

Smith, who often hikes with his German shorthair pointer Sherman and his schnauzer Oscar, says it is crucial to bring water and a collapsible bowl for dogs as well as snacks (larger dogs can carry their own supplies in a backpack that fits like a saddlebag). A first aid kit with tweezers, bandages, gauze, and a knife can be helpful in case of thorns or pricklers — or worse. If a dog encounters a porcupine, for example, you can remove a quill by cutting it and the quill will deflate, making it much easier to dislodge if you cannot wait to return downhill to a veterinarian.

Sun protection is important, and people should consider putting sunscreen on light-skinned dogs or buying dog sunglasses like Doggles. These will protect a dog's eyes from cornea and retina damage due to ultraviolet light, or from being poked in the eyes by pine needles.

And if you've been hiking with your dog for years but it is developing mild arthritis problems, there's no reason to quit hiking — just check with your veterinarian to see if a prescription for anti-inflammatory pain medication will help prevent your pooch from being sore afterwards.

The bottom line: Taking a few precautions can ensure that your pet stays healthy and enjoys the hiking season.

"It's just great fun to watch your dog be super-happy on trails. And if you're hiking alone, it's a sense of security as well," Baird says. "I know it sounds cheesy, but it's good, quality time with your pets!"

Jen Reeder writes about pet health topics from her home office in Denver.

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