



DOGGING IT

When man's best friend gets too fat, that pet becomes a potential fitness aid for its owner.

By **GRETCHEN REYNOLDS**

The chubby, inert pet dog has become a familiar household sight in richer countries. And yet there lies a possible boon to the out-of-shape among us. A recent study suggests that being told one's pet is dangerously overweight might provide the impetus that gets an owner moving.

It might seem that having a pet dog would result in considerable physical activity, and that's true, broadly speaking. A 2013 review of

studies related to dog ownership concluded that as a group, dog owners spend almost an hour more per week walking than people without dogs. Even so, a survey from 2008 conducted in Australia found that nearly a quarter of all dog owners reported never walking their pets. This population of dog owners, studies show, actually engage in less physical activity each week than people without a dog.

A majority of dog owners, of course, are deeply attached to their

pets, whether they walk them or not. That bond prompted a group of scientists, veterinarians and physicians at the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences, in Bethesda, Md., and other institutions to consider whether people might be willing to undertake a health-and-fitness regimen targeted at their dog, even if they had little enthusiasm for such a program for themselves.

The researchers recruited 32 dog owners who visited a veterinary

clinic in Maryland. Their dogs varied widely in age, breed and size, but all were overweight or obese and, by and large, sedentary. So, too, were most of their owners (although the only criterion for their participation was that their dogs be rotund). Half the volunteers were told by a veterinarian to watch their dog's nutrition and monitor its health. The rest were told that their dog was overweight and needed more exercise. These owners were given specific exercise prescriptions, which generally advised walking the dog for at least 30 minutes every day.

Three months later, the volunteers and their dogs were re-evaluated. Both owners and pets in the dog-walking group had lost weight. But more interesting, those who had been told only that their pets were worryingly heavy also began exercising their pets and themselves. They reported walking far more often than they did before they got health warnings for their dogs, and both they and their pets were thinner.

The upshot, says Capt. Mark B. Stephens M.D., a professor of family medicine at Uniformed Services University and a co-author of the study—it was published in September in the journal *Anthrozoös*—is that “love and concern for a dog can be a powerful motivation for exercise.” Which is not to say, he adds, that people should adopt a dog as a kind of fitness device. Unlike a treadmill, Marley cannot be abandoned in the basement when you tire of working out. On the other hand, no device will ever be so happy to see you lace up your walking shoes. ♦