Remember the TV show “Lassie”? That collie managed to save someone’s life nearly every week. Well, supposedly our current canine companions can also contribute to our health and well-being, although not in such a spectacular way. The bottom line is that owning a dog is good for health in so far as the owner actually takes the pooch on a daily walk, thus increasing both their exercise levels. But apparently, that doesn’t always hold true, as some Australian researchers have found. So they investigated the factors that might change the extent to which owning dogs either motivated or encouraged their owners to move — the Lassie effect.

Dr. C. Westgarth from the University of Liverpool, Leahurst, Australia, and colleagues used data from the RESIDE survey in Western Australia to assess “dog encouragement to walk’ in a response to a query — ‘how often in the last month the dog encouraged me to walk’. They also assessed motivation as — ‘Having a dog makes me walk more.’ There were 629 dog owners included in the survey. Their goal was to identify factors that either facilitate or block the Lassie effect of instigating more walking in dog owners. Frequent walking was defined as walking the dog 3 or more times per week.
What they found was that a number of factors could influence the likelihood of an owner walking his or her dog. The dog-related factors that significantly increased the probability of frequent walks was the size of the dog, with medium/large dogs more likely to be walked; so was a high degree of attachment to the dog, and the person answering the question being most responsible for dog-walking. Also, believing that the dog enjoys going for a walk was associated with a greater likelihood of walking, as was believing that walking would keep the dog healthy and decrease barking. Conversely, if the dog was old or sick, the probability of walking frequently was lower, as one might expect.

Another influence increasing the probability of frequent walks was social support from friends for walking.

Overall, the researchers reported “Forty-five percent of owners reported that their dog ‘very often (3+ per week)’ ‘encouraged them to walk’ in the past month and 66 % of owners reported that they agreed with the statement ‘Having my dog(s) makes me walk more’.”

In their conclusion, the authors noted that both dog-specific and human-dog relationship factors importantly influence a person’s perceived need to walk their dog. They suggest that interventions to increase the frequency of dog walking (and owner exercise) might be targeted at owners of small dogs and older dogs in terms of the amounts of exercise these animals require.

Such interventions would require, they say, some collaborations between healthcare providers, veterinarians, and experts in dog behavior.

Although this study was Australian, its results are certainly possible to extrapolate to other western countries such as the US. It provides some insight into the factors that can influence a person’s increasing activity via dog walking, and suggests which factors to encourage to sustain the Lassie effect.

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