

## **Walk A Hound, Lose A Pound, & Stay Fit for Seniors**

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**Background:** Obesity rates in older adults are linked with the national problem of limited physical activity (PA), resulting in chronic illness. Obesity-related illness and functional loss require innovative interventions. Older adult dog walkers maintained physical functioning over a 3 year period (Thorpe 2006). Dog walking may improve long-term PA by improving readiness and physical function.

**Purpose:** The study aimed to test the association between dog walking and physical functioning.

**Methods:** A three-group, repeated measures design tested efficacy of a 12-week (5 days/week) shelter dog walking program for community-dwelling adults over age 65. Three retirement facilities were assigned to the shelter dog walking (DW), human walking companion (HWC), or no-treatment control (C) group. DW group members selected a dog matching their walking capability & walked on a paved road at the animal shelter. HWC group members walked with a friend or spouse on a paved road at their residence. Both groups were accompanied by study staff. Pretest, mid-trial & posttest findings included 6-minute walk, weight, physical activity during the previous week, physical activity stage of change, mood & social support.

**Findings:** Fifty-four adults participated {DW n=12, HWC n=23 & C n=19}.

Fourteen males & 40 females, ranged in age from 67-97 years (Mean=85). The 6-minute walk compared pre and post for the DW group increased 28% (p=0.012), the HWC had a 4% increase (p=0.32) and the C group a 6% increase (p=0.18).

**Conclusions:** DW group participants expressed affinity for the shelter dogs. The DW group's walking ability improved significantly. They stated that their balance & walking confidence improved. They stated that they liked the program because it "gets me out," "is helping me to feel more confident," & "is fun." Dog walking

may be beneficial to improve or maintain functioning in older adults. Walking speed is an important indicator of balance.