INTRODUCTION
The rising rate of obesity in older adults is linked with the national problem of limited physical activity, resulting in chronic illness.
Dog walking may improve long-term physical activity by improving readiness and physical function.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
• To what extent do older adults in a dog walking group have better physical function, physical activity, and weight loss than those in a human companion walking group or a no-treatment control group?
• What are the participants’ perceptions of the walking program (dog or human companion)?

DESIGN & PARTICIPANTS
• Three-group, repeated measures design
• Adults over the age of 65
• Health care provider gave assent
• Fitted with walking shoes
• 12-week / 5 days per week walking program

Three retirement facilities served as recruitment sites for:
• Shelter Dog Companion (SDC) walking group came to the shelter to walk (matched with dog for walking ability),
• Human Companion (HC) walking group walked around their facility.
• No-treatment control group maintained usual activity.

DATA ANALYSIS
• Wilcoxon Signed Rank Sum test using a 0.05 level of determining significance of findings.

This study was made possible by:

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FINDINGS

PRE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Shelter Dog Companion Walking Group N=12</th>
<th>Human Companion Walking Group N=23</th>
<th>Control N=19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical Activity Stage of Change PRE</td>
<td>Range Mean</td>
<td>2 – 6</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Activity Stage of Change POST 12 weeks</td>
<td>Range Mean</td>
<td>2 – 8</td>
<td>5.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 minute walk (yards) PRE</td>
<td>Range Mean</td>
<td>153 - 420</td>
<td>270.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 minute walk (yards) POST 12 weeks</td>
<td>Range Mean</td>
<td>215 - 497</td>
<td>369</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

OVERALL FINDINGS
• SDC walking group had significantly improved walking speed.
• Both walking groups became competitive with their walking times & distances.
• SDC group expressed an affinity for & a bond with the shelter dogs that they walked.
• Given the added challenge of walking a dog on a lead. SDC group believed that their balance & walking confidence improved.
• HC group sometimes discouraged others from walking.
• No significant differences in weight over time.

PARTICIPANT RESPONSES
General Comments:
• “I have benefited from this program and will continue to walk several times each week, having taken part and reporting to someone gave me some discipline for a good habit.”
• “I would get up ready to go. I would wonder which dog I would have. The thing that was the hardest was the extreme heat. All the assistants were very good and I enjoyed all of them.”

The Best Part:
• “The exercise itself. My physical energy has improved. My legs have been strengthened and I think I just feel better. My enthusiasm for exercise has been increased.”
• “Getting to walk with the dogs.”

The Worst Part:
• “The heat and humidity and getting up to walk— I like to sleep in!”

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