

A solid green rectangular block is located in the top left corner. A thin gold square is positioned at the bottom right corner of this green block. A thin grey line extends horizontally from the right side of the gold square.

# **Pet Ownership and Exercise: An *AARP Bulletin* Poll**

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# **Pet Ownership and Exercise An AARP Bulletin Poll**

**Data Collected by Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS)  
Report Prepared by Teresa A. Keenan, Ph.D.**

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## Executive Summary

In an effort to learn more about pet ownership and exercise among midlife and older adults, in February 2010, AARP Knowledge Management fielded a short telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of 1,062 adults ages 50 and older.

### **Key Findings:**

- Dog ownership appears to be more common than ownership of other types of pets, consistent with other data sources<sup>1</sup>. While nearly four in ten respondents said they own a dog, roughly one-quarter said they own a cat. Fewer than one in ten respondents report owning a bird, a reptile, or another un-specified type of pet. Nearly half of the respondents said they do not own a pet.
- Among pet owners, more than six in ten said they got their pet for companionship. One in nine pet owners said they acquired their pet as a playmate for their child (or children), while one in eleven reported getting a pet for security or protection. Two percent of pet owners said they got a pet for breeding or profit-making purposes. Notably, roughly three in ten pet owners said they acquired a pet for reasons other than those about which they were asked.
- More than half of dog owners said they generally walk with their dog as a form of pet exercise. Additionally, nearly four in ten said they play catch, ball or Frisbee with their dog or let their dog run unsupervised as a form of pet exercise, while nearly one-fifth report jogging or running with their dog or wrestling with their dog.
- Three in ten dog owners report exercising with their dog once a day and one-quarter said they do so more than once a day. Roughly one in six dog owners said they exercise their dog 2-3 times per week, one in thirteen do so several times a month, and one in twenty do so every other day. In contrast, nearly one-fifth of dog owners said they never exercise with their dog.
- Six in ten dog owners report getting about the same amount of exercise now as compared to before they got their dog, while three in ten report getting more exercise. Six percent of dog owners, however, said they get less exercise now as compared to before they got their dog.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the American Veterinary Medical Association (2007) estimates 37 percent of U.S. households own dogs, 32 percent own cats, 4 percent own birds, and 2 percent own horses.

## Background

Intrigued by recent research findings which suggest that walking with a dog leads to more consistent regular exercise and improved fitness levels, AARP decided to field a short survey in the hopes of shedding more light on this topic<sup>2,3</sup>. In February 2010, AARP Knowledge Management contracted with Social Science Research Solutions (SSRS) to field the telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of adults ages 50 and older to learn more about pet ownership and exercise<sup>4,5</sup>.

In this survey, respondents were asked what types of pets they own and their major reason for acquiring a pet. Respondents who own dogs were asked how they exercise with their dog, about how often they do so, and if they believe the amount of exercise they get has changed since they acquired their dog<sup>6</sup>.

## Detailed Findings<sup>7</sup>

### *Pet Ownership*

Nearly four in ten (38%) respondents said they own a dog, while roughly one-quarter (24%) own a cat. Fewer than one in ten respondents report owning a bird (3%), a reptile (2%), or another un-specified type of pet (4%). In contrast, nearly half (46%) of the respondents said they do not own a pet.

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<sup>2</sup>See Tara Parker-Pope's December 14, 2009 *New York Times* article, *The Best Walking Partner: Man vs. Dog*, which highlights a University of Missouri study of older adults at an assisted-living facility.

<sup>3</sup> See also an article by Allison Takeda <<http://www.parade.com/health/2010/01/17-a-happy-way-to-get-fit.html>> which cites a British study of 5000 individuals, the findings of which suggest that dog walkers accumulate more physical activity per week than do individuals who go to a gym or health club on a regular basis or who exercise on their own.

<sup>4</sup> The survey was fielded between February 24 and March 7, 2010. At the conclusion of the fielding period, responses had been received from 1,062 individuals. The sampling error is +/- 3.01 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. This means that in 95 out of 100 samples of this size, the results would fall in a range of no more than three percentage points of what would have been obtained if every person age 50 or older had been surveyed.

<sup>5</sup> Data were weighted by age and gender to reflect the U.S. population age 50 and older.

<sup>6</sup> With the exception of the final question about exercise since acquiring a dog, the questions contained in this survey are identical to those used in the *1995 Pet Owner Survey* conducted by the American Animal Hospital Association. Comparisons are noted throughout the text.

<sup>7</sup> Respondents in this study are ages 50 and over with six in ten (60%) between the ages of 50 and 64 and four in ten (40%) aged 65 and older. Somewhat more than half are women (54%) and slightly less than half are men (46%). Roughly eight in ten (78%) are white, non-Hispanic; one in ten (10%) are black, non-Hispanic; eight percent are Hispanic. One-half had a high school education (35%) or less (15%), while one-fifth (21%) had some college or technical training and slightly more than one-quarter (27%) had a college or post-graduate education. More than one-third (35%) have household incomes of less than \$30,000 per year, while slightly less than one-fifth (17%) have household incomes of \$30,000-\$49,999 per year. Eleven percent reported an annual household income of \$50,000-\$74,999, while roughly one-fifth (19%) reported an annual household income of \$75,000 or more.

- Respondents ages 50-64 are more likely than those ages 65 or older to say they own dogs (45% vs. 27%), cats (27% vs. 19%), or other (non-specified) pets (6% vs. 1%). In contrast, respondents ages 65 or older are more likely than younger respondents to report they do not own pets (60% vs. 37%).
- While there are no gender differences in pet ownership, there are differences by income level. Specifically, less affluent respondents are more likely than more affluent ones to say they do not own a pet (50% of those with annual household incomes less than \$25,000; 47% of those with incomes between \$25,000 and \$49,999; and 44% of those with incomes between \$50,000 and \$74,999 vs. 31% of those with incomes of \$75,000 or more).
- Additionally, respondents with annual household incomes of \$75,000 or more are more likely than those with incomes less than \$50,000 to say they own a dog (52% vs. 35% for those with incomes less than \$25,000 and 37% for those with incomes between \$25,000 and \$49,999). They are also more likely than those with incomes of less than \$25,000 per year to say they own a cat (31% vs. 21%).

### ***Major Reason for Acquiring a Pet***

Among respondents who reported having a pet, more than six in ten (61%) said they got their pet for companionship. One in nine (11%) pet owners said they acquired their pet as a playmate for their child (or children), while one in eleven (9%) reported getting a pet for security or protection. Two percent said they got a pet for breeding or profit-making purposes. Notably, roughly three in ten (29%) pet owners said they acquired a pet for reasons other than those about which they were asked<sup>8</sup>.

- Older pet owners are more likely than younger ones to report having acquired their pet for companionship (71% vs. 56%). Younger respondents are more likely than older ones to say they acquired their pet for reasons other than the ones they were asked about specifically (31% vs. 22%).
- Men who own pets are more likely than women who own pets to say the major reason for having acquired their pet was for security or protection (12% vs. 5%). In contrast, female pet owners are more likely than their male counterparts to say they got their pet for companionship (67% vs. 54%).
- Pet owners with annual household incomes of less than \$25,000 are more likely than those with incomes between \$25,000 and \$49,999 to report getting their pet primarily for companionship (69% vs. 52%). Pet owners with annual household incomes of \$75,000 or more are more likely than those with incomes of less than \$25,000 to say the major reason they acquired their pet was as a child's playmate (18% vs. 9%).

### ***Ways of Exercising with Dog***

Dog owners were asked about the ways they exercise with their dog, how often they do so, and whether they believe their exercise level has changed since they acquired their dog.

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<sup>8</sup> In comparison, eight in ten (80%) respondents to the American Animal Hospital Association's (AAHA) 1995 *Pet Owner Survey* (which was conducted among pet owners who take their pets to AAHA veterinarians) said they got their pet for companionship, one in ten (10%) said they got their pet as a child's playmate, and one in twenty (5%) said they got their pet for security or protection.

More than half (56%) of the dog owners said they generally walk with their dog as a form of pet exercise. Nearly four in ten respondents said they play catch, ball or Frisbee (37%) with their dog or let their dog run unsupervised (37%) as a form of pet exercise, while nearly one-fifth report jogging or running with their dog (18%) or wrestling with their dog (18%). Six percent of dog owners report doing none of the activities about which they were asked<sup>9</sup>.

- Among dog owners, those ages 50-64 are more likely than those ages 65 or older to say they jog or run with their dog (21% vs. 9%); play catch, ball, or Frisbee (42% vs. 26%); or wrestle with their dog (21% vs. 11%).
- Women are more likely than men to say they play catch, ball, or Frisbee (46% vs. 29%) with their dog. Notably, there are no other gender differences in patterns of exercise with dogs.
- Respondents with annual household incomes between \$25,000 and \$49,999 and those with incomes of \$75,000 or more are more likely than those with incomes of less than \$25,000 to report that they wrestle with their dog as a form of pet exercise (23% and 22% vs. 9%). Respondents with incomes between \$50,000 and \$74,999 are also more likely to report wrestling with their dog, albeit at a level which is not statistically different from that of those with incomes of less than \$25,000 (20% vs. 9%).

### ***Frequency of Exercise with Dog***

Three in ten (30%) dog owners report exercising with their dog once a day and one-quarter (25%) said they do so more than once a day<sup>10</sup>. Roughly one in six (17%) dog owners said they exercise their dog 2-3 times per week, one in thirteen (7%) do so several times a month, and one in twenty (5%) do so every other day. Notably, nearly one-fifth (15%) of dog owners said they never exercise with their dog.

- Older dog owners are more likely than younger ones to report exercising with their dog more than once a day (33% vs. 22%), a finding which may be reflective of older respondents—especially those who are retired—having more “free” time.
- Women who own dogs are more likely than men who own dogs to report exercising with them more than once a day (30% vs. 20%). Men who own dogs are more likely to report exercising with them 2-3 times per week (21% vs. 12%).
- There are no income differences in the frequency of exercise with one’s dog.

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<sup>9</sup> According to the previously-cited 1995 AAHA *Pet Owners Survey*, nearly six in ten (58%) dog owners walk with their dog; one-half (51%) play catch, ball, or Frisbee with their dog; and about one-third wrestle with their dog (33%) or let it run unsupervised (32%). Another ten percent said they jog with their dog as a form or exercise.

<sup>10</sup> Respondents to the 1995 *Pet Owners Survey* noted somewhat more frequent exercise, with nearly four in ten (38%) saying they exercise with their dog more than once a day and three in ten (30%) saying they exercise with their dog at least once a day. Half as many dog owners in the AAHA study reported never walking with their dog as compared with dog owners in the AARP study.

### ***Exercise Patterns since Acquiring Dog***

Six in ten (59%) dog owners report getting about the same amount of exercise now as compared to before they got their dog, while three in ten (29%) report getting more exercise. Six percent of dog owners, however, said they get less exercise now as compared to before they got their dog.

- Older dog owners are more likely than younger ones to say they exercise less now that they have their dog (11% vs. 4%).
- Women who own dogs are more likely than men who own dogs to say they get more exercise now as compared to before they got their dog (37% vs. 22%), while men who own dogs are more likely to say they get the same amount of exercise (67% vs. 50%).
- Dog owners with annual household incomes between \$25,000 and \$49,999 are more likely than those with incomes of \$75,000 or more to say they get less exercise now (10% vs. 2%).

### **Conclusions**

Results of this survey lend some support to the notion of a positive relationship between pet ownership and exercise among pet owners, although the magnitude of relationship is not entirely clear. While about three in ten dog owners report getting more exercise now as compared to before they got their dog and another six in ten report getting about the same amount now as in the past, it is not possible to ascertain the levels of exercise from our survey questions nor is it possible to determine if the levels of exercise are meeting national guidelines.

## Appendix A: Annotated Questionnaire

**Survey on Pet Owners and Exercise\*<sup>11</sup>**  
(n=1,062)

Question 1: What type of pet(s) do you own?

Dog	38%
Cat	24%
Bird	3%
Reptile	2%
Other:	4%
I don't own a pet	46%

Asked of respondents who have pets; n=566

Question 2: What was the major reason for acquiring your pet?

Security/protection	9%
Companionship	61%
Child's playmate	11%
Profit/breeding	2%
Other	29%

Questions 3-5 Asked of respondents who have dogs; n=403

Question 3: How do you exercise your dog? <Pick all that apply.>

Jog/run with dog	18%
Play catch, ball, or Frisbee	37%
Walk dog	56%
Wrestle with dog	18%
Let dog run unsupervised	37%
None of the above	6%

Question 4: About how often do you exercise with your dog?

More than once a day	25%
Once a day	30%
Every other day	5%
2-3 times per week	17%
Several times a month	7%
Never	15%

Question 5: Compared to how much you exercised before you got your dog, would you say you get more exercise, less exercise, or about the same amount of exercise now that you have your dog?

More	29%
About the same amount	6%
Less	59%
Always had a dog	4%

*We're almost finished.* I just have a few additional questions that I'd like to ask for classification purposes.

<sup>11</sup> Weighted data are presented in the annotated questionnaire.

## **Demographic Characteristics**

What is your age as of your last birthday? \_\_\_\_\_ years

50-64	60%
65+	40%

Are you male or female?

Male	46%
Female	54%

Are you or your spouse or partner currently a member of AARP?

Yes	41%
No	58%
Don't Know	1%

What is your current marital status?

Married	58%
Widowed	16%
Divorced	13%
Separated	3%
Single	7%
Single, living with partner	2%

What is the highest level of education that you completed?

Less than high school	15%
High school graduate	35%
Some college or technical training beyond high school	21%
College graduate	16%
Post-graduate or professional degree	11%

Which of the following best describes your current employment status?

Employed or self-employed <u>full-time</u>	30%
Employed or self-employed <u>part-time</u>	9%
Retired and not working	44%
Unemployed and looking for work	6%
Other such as homemaker	4%
Disabled/handicapped	6%

What best describes your race?

White, non-Hispanic	78%
Black, non-Hispanic	10%
Hispanic	8%

Households are sometimes grouped according to income. Please indicate which group best estimates your annual household income before taxes. *(Check only one.)*

Less than \$10,000	9%
\$10,000 to \$19,999	14%
\$20,000 to \$29,999	12%
\$30,000 to \$39,999	9%
\$40,000 to \$49,999	8%
\$50,000 to \$74,999	11%
\$75,000 or more	19%
Don't Know/Refused	11%



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