Pooches And Walking Study (PAWS)

A physical activity intervention targeting dog owners

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Research students
Seeking a suitable PhD student.

Industry partners and collaborators
The National Heart Foundation (WA Division)
Petcare Information and Advisory Service
Australian Veterinary Association (WA branch)

Background and aim
Sixty three percent of Australian households own a pet and 38% own one or more dogs [1]. Pet ownership is associated with a number of physical, mental and emotional health benefits [2]. One of the key mechanisms through which pets may facilitate improved health outcomes may be from the increased physical activity associated with owning a dog [2]. A number of studies have found dog ownership is positively associated with physical activity. Dog owners are more physically active and are more likely to meet the recommended level of physical activity compared with non-owners [3]. Recent Australian research reported that dog owners did significantly more minutes of walking (150 vs. 111) and physical activity (322 vs. 267) per week than non-owners [3]. While the literature supports the principle that dog owners are more physically active than non-owners, it
appears that dog ownership does not facilitate increased activity in all owners. Up to 60% of dog owners report no dog-related activity [4, 5].

Innovative and effective intervention strategies are required to assist policy-makers and practitioners increase population levels of physical activity. With dog ownership high in many countries, dog walking is increasingly being recognised as a potential source of physical activity. Dog owners may be encouraged to begin walking with their dog as it is a relatively easy, cheap and readily accessible form and cue for daily exercise. Dog owners constitute 38% of the Australian population and are an important potential target group for physical activity intervention. This study will test and compare the efficacy of minimal physical activity minimal intervention strategies targeting dog owners visiting their local veterinarian.

This research will provide specific evidence on how best to engage with inactive dog owners and disseminate campaign messages on dog walking for health promotion programs aimed at increasing physical activity. It will provide practitioners with creative and cost-effective strategies to increase physical activity.


Methods

The study targets veterinary clinics as a setting for reaching a significant proportion of dog owners. The study design is based on the GP-setting intervention model which has been shown to be an effective intervention for increasing physical activity over the short-medium term. This study will use a mixed-methods approach and has four phases of research:

1. Focus groups will be used to examine the barriers and motivators for dog walking amongst dog owners who do not walk with their dog.
2. Pilot-test minimal intervention strategies based on a GP-setting intervention model within a veterinary clinic setting with dog owners who do little or no walking with their dog (n=200).
3. Test the efficacy of minimal physical activity intervention strategies aimed at increasing community levels of dog walking (n=1800).
4. Dissemination of research findings to industry partners, collaborators and key stakeholders. Dog walking strategies that are identified as viable in terms of time, cost and effectiveness will be promoted amongst health practitioners, local government authorities and other relevant community groups.

Ethics approval for this research has been provided by The University of Western Australia Human (RA/4/1/4800) and Animal (RA/3/100/1047) Research Ethics Committees.

For more information on the PAWS project please contact Asst/Prof Hayley Christian (6488 1267 or hayley.christian@uwa.edu.au) or Mrs Claire Lauritsen (6488 7803 or claire.lauritsen@uwa.edu.au).