

Walking the dog keeps owners healthy and neighbourhoods feeling safe

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Credit: University of Western Australia

An international study carried out by Dr Hayley Christian from The University of Western Australia (UWA) has found dog walkers are not only more likely to be physically active but that walking the dog can help people in their neighbourhood feel safer.

It is the first international study of its kind to consistently examine the relationship between dog walking, [physical activity](#) and people's perception of safety in their community. The research, conducted in collaboration with the WALTHAM Centre for Pet Nutrition, found that people who walked their dog achieved at least 30 minutes of physical activity on more days per week than non-dog walkers, helping them to meet the 150 minutes of physical activity per week recommended for good health

More than 1000 [dog owners](#) from Perth, Australia and three US cities (San Diego, Nashville and Portland) were surveyed in the Pet Connections study.

Almost 60 per cent of dog walkers in Australia and the US reported feeling safer when walking with

their dog and women who walked their dogs were more likely than men to feel safer.

Hayley Christian, from UWA's School of Population Health who led the study said the results demonstrated the physical and social benefits of dog walking.

"In all four cities dog owners walked their dog 5 to 6 times a week for more than 90 minutes a week," Dr Christian said.

"Dog walkers were also more than three times more likely to walk in their neighbourhood, suggesting that dog walking helps you get to know your local area and neighbours.

Dr Christian said dog walkers regularly out in their neighbourhood became the 'eyes and ears on the street'.

"This natural surveillance provides opportunities for people to interact, and monitor their neighbourhood and notice unusual behaviour, which can help deter local crime and make people feel safer," she said.

"Particularly in the US study sites, dog walkers had a greater feeling of security and perceived there was more neighbourhood surveillance from dog walking than those studied in Perth.

"This may be due to social and cultural differences in dog-keeping and exercising practices. There are large differences between Australia and the US around the design and access to public places for walking dogs. We found significantly fewer dog walkers in the US study sites walked in their local park compare to those in Perth."

Dr Christian said the study highlighted the physical and social benefits for individuals and communities of pet ownership and the need to have health programs and policies to support [dog walkers](#).

More information: Hayley Christian et al. The association between dog walking, physical activity and owner's perceptions of safety: cross-sectional evidence from the US and Australia, *BMC Public Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-016-3659-8](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-016-3659-8)

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