

Boxer Puppy Exercise Schedule

Why and why not:

A Boxer puppy's skeleton isn't completely mature until at least 18 months of age. The bones' growth plates fuse sometimes in the tenth month, but then the bones undergo a lot of remodeling - the structure changes as the bones adapt to the stresses put on them.

While the bones are growing, it is not safe to over exercise your puppy. It is important that you bring your puppy outside at an early age to get him used to all the smells and sounds. But it is also important not to do any permanent damage to the puppy's growing skeleton. When you damage the skeleton, joint problems may result. Such problems are painful and may result in lameness.

Growing puppies need to get plenty of rest, the right food, lots of love and gentle exercise. Playing in the yard and a gentle walk to the end of the street and back is more than enough exercise for a young puppy. Remember to stop all activities and let your puppy rest as soon as he or she shows signs of tiring. Young bones and joints can be damaged by overly strenuous exercise, with problems sometimes only becoming apparent as the dog matures.

To understand why we say this, we need to have a very quick look at bone and joint growth and development in puppies:

! Puppy's bones aren't fully formed and hardened until at least 18 months old.

! Until the bones have fully formed - the hip, elbow and other limb joints will not fully "set".

! Until this "setting" takes place any over exercise of these joints will result in a loose and irregular final fit.

! Even though both parents may have excellent hip scores, it's still very possible for a puppy to develop hip dysplasia - caused by over exercise.

! There's no real cure for dysplasia, and at best it will result in early arthritis, which is an irreversible condition and is very painful.

Bones should eventually become tough and strong structures able to support the weight and normal functioning of the animal they belong to, but they are not that way while they are growing! During growth, bones and joints are relatively soft, fragile and highly vulnerable to physical trauma. Excessive exercise or any stresses that are too great for young puppy will cause the bones and joints to become misshapen, deformed and painful. The trauma that bones and joints can experience from excessive "simple walking" can result in minute fractures in the cartilage, blood loss to the joint and the growth plate. This produces a wide range of orthopedic diseases including dysplasia, osteochondritis and DJD.

Read that again - please - it's important!

What amount of exercise is safe?

Let's now have a look at how you can help prevent this tragedy from happening to your puppy. There aren't any scientific studies to determine where exactly to draw the line between a good amount of exercise and over exercise. One jump or a single 40-minute hike for a 10 month old is probably reasonably safe and may be impossible to avoid. But the more consistently you go beyond the guidelines, the greater the chances of injury. We suggest the following guidelines for exercise until your Boxer reaches 18 months of age. These are only guidelines for healthy puppies - as always be aware of the risks and use your own judgment.

Walking

To determine how much your puppy is allowed to walk on leash, multiply his age in months by five. The resulting number is how many minutes per day your puppy can do walks on leash and this works for puppies from 3 to 12 months old.

An 8 weeks old puppy is not allowed any leashed walks.

A 3 months old puppy will be allowed 15 minutes a day, and at 10 months old - 50 minutes.

From 12 to 18 months old your Boxer should be allowed a maximum of one hour of leashed walking.

Don't walk your puppy for more than the recommended number of minutes a day. What you're trying to minimize is the stress of repeatedly jarring the joints.

At 3 months, start daily walks on a "non-extending" lead and on a good firm surface such as ground, grass, sand road, but not asphalt, concrete or ice, for 15 minutes a day, gradually building up the time of the exercise to, at 6 months, about 30 minutes per day. This provides an opportunity to introduce your dog to the outside world of traffic, people and the general noises of everyday life. If walking in the park, drive or carry your puppy to and from the park.

Bicycling

It is not a good idea to ride your bicycle or roller blades and expect your puppy to follow alongside until at least 18 months old!

Eating exercise

Providing your puppy with a raw meaty non-splinting bone (no rawhides please) to chew on several times a week is an essential part of developing puppy's bones and muscles to be strong and his joints to be tight. Eating exercise provides isometric exercise for every muscle in the body and stresses the bones and joints in a very healthy way.

Tug

Playing tug-of-war is a wonderful way to exercise your Boxer puppy as long as he does not become tired. You should always stop when your puppy is still asking for more. For future Schutzhund dogs, make sure your puppy wins every time. For puppies that are family pets, make the puppy sit and release the tug on command when done playing - you should win every time. Exchanging the tug for a treat is a good way to accomplish this.

Playing fetch

Fetching is OK, within reason. For example, you wouldn't want to throw an object over 20 meters, 10 times in a row for your puppy to retrieve. We know a lot of Boxers have fun chasing balls. Our own Boxers would die before they stopped playing on their own. We think it is OK to play ball with a couple of caveats:

Don't make it the only or the major way you exercise your dog.

Always play carefully and on a safe surface - soft grass without holes or dips.

Be careful of heatstroke, even in winter.

For a puppy under 6 months old roll the ball on the ground instead of throwing.

From 6 months on throw the ball as far as you can, so there is more running and less scrambling over the ball.

Use a Frisbee only with caution and throw them low. It is best to avoid Frisbees altogether until 12 months old.

Time guidelines:

No fetching before 3 months old, between 3 and 12 months old multiply the age of the puppy in months by two, the resulting number is the number of minutes your puppy is allowed to play fetch per day over several sessions.

Playing with other puppies

Wrestling and play fighting with other puppies of similar age and size is very beneficial and can be safely allowed.

Jumping

A puppy under 8 months old should not ever be allowed to jump beyond his carpus height. From 8 months old a puppy is allowed to jump up to his elbow height. Jumping and twisting games must be avoided altogether until 18 months old.

Free running

This is an excellent exercise for your puppy and he/she can be allowed to do as much free

running as he/she wants providing there are no older dogs, children or adults that persuade the puppy to keep up with them!

Swimming

Swimming is excellent exercise - just be careful about how the puppy gets in and out of the water. Steep, muddy banks are definitely not good. On a sunny day and if the water is warm, you can allow your 6 months old or older puppy to stay in the water for as much as he wants. Do not have him retrieve a toy from the water by repeatedly throwing it in. Never allow your dog to remain cold, wet and tired after a swim or even walk in the rain. Towel dry the best you can.

Tracking

It is definitely a good and safe exercise to teach your puppy to track. Start with simple "find the treat" games and do not progress onto long difficult tracks until at least 12 months old. For working prospects, follow the advice of your trainer, but do not do tracks that are too long.

Additional important notes:

1. **No forced exercise** before 6 months of age! Right after 6 months, most of the puppy's exercise would need to be strength exercises.

Leave any type of endurance exercise for until after 18 months old.

2. **Don't let an adult dog or human set the pace for a puppy!** You don't want to force your puppy to keep up to you or his older buddy beyond the point of what hurts him. Since Boxers are so eager to please their human master and just love other canine members of their family, the puppy will try his best to keep up, even if running makes him sore. Never allow your puppy uncontrolled free running with an older dog! By all means let them meet and play for 5 - 10 minutes, but keep the puppy within the pen or a small confined area in the yard under your ever-watchful eye otherwise. Please do your best to explain to your children that they should not be engaging the puppy in chasing or fetching games and do be around a lot to make sure they follow your request.

3. **If possible don't allow your puppy to jump** up or down from the back of the car! Put on his leash and then lift him out.

4. **No stairs!** Obviously, most puppies must get used to going up and down stairs. But don't have extended play periods where your puppy is chasing people, cat or another dog up and down stairs. Avoid stairs - there's nothing worse for a puppy's hips and elbows than allowing it to run up and down. If you want the young pup upstairs, carry it up. Do not ever let him climb up no matter how cute he might look when doing it.

5. **Listen to your puppy!** When out exercising, if your puppy stops and sits down, you have certainly overdone the exercise, and the puppy will need to be carried home. Your goal should be to get your puppy some exercise with him still ending bouncy and full of himself, not tired and dragging.

6. **No exercise after eating!** Never allow your puppy to have vigorous exercise just before or after a meal - it could be fatal for your dog!

7. **Spondylosis warning!** Many agility instructors suggest that you don't teach a puppy weave poles until 18 months, since the side-to-side motion puts stress on the back and spine. Additionally, avoid games where your puppy repeatedly twists his spine.

8. **Let them be puppies!** For those owners who plan on doing competitive sports with their Boxers - what we see in dogs pushed too hard physically when they are too young is that it's really difficult to keep them motivated as they get older. Most of this is because they are not as sound as they would have been had they been brought along at a healthier pace, and some is from trying to instill a work ethic into a youngster who needs to be learning to enjoy life. There is a lot that goes on in a dog's body that they don't tell us about. Little aches and pains, and maybe the occasional sprain or strain, or the beginnings of arthritis developing, etc. We feel very strongly that we should be letting their bodies develop before training intensively or competing.

Conclusions:

We can't overstress the importance of being careful when administering exercise to your Boxer puppy, especially for that first year! The bones of your puppy must become a support and movement system, which will serve him well for the rest of his life. Their initial fragility means that the only reliable and healthy forms of exercise a pup should have until his bones are mature are eating exercise, short walks, free running and play.

A puppy should never be allowed to become fat, or to be exercised or walked or run until exhaustion. As the puppy gets older, he will be more able to cope with longer exercise periods. Hold him back, if necessary, and do not let his drives overcome your common sense.

Moderation is the key, and if you are careful with that young puppy, then at 18-24 months your young dog should be healthy, fully developed, and, with proper training, will happily travel much further than you'd dream of and come back for more!