

Behaviour Tips: *My dog is always active – should I walk him more?*

You may find that no matter how much you walk your dog or give them attention, they never seem to be able to relax. There could be more going on underneath the surface and this handout is to help guide you in figuring out what is going on with your best friend and how you can help them (and yourself)!

What are the ‘reactive’/‘hyper’ diagnoses?

The first step is to look at what behaviours your dog is eliciting. Then try to figure out if those behaviours line up with any of the types of “activity” described in this handout. There are 5 types of “activity”: overactivity, general anxiety disorder (GAD), hyperactivity, hyper-reactivity, and attention-seeking behaviour.

Overactivity

Overactive dogs are always ready to go for a walk or play, but they can relax when appropriate, such as at bedtime. This type of activity can be resolved by increasing their aerobic activity and interaction. A few things to keep in mind when adjusting your dog’s exercise needs, such as the age of your dog, dog’s breed, and your dog’s ideal social and physical environment.

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

Dogs with GAD will consistently exhibit an increased autonomic response (elevated heart rate, respiratory rate, dilated pupils), increased motor activity, vigilance, and scanning that interferes with normal interaction. These dogs are reactive before any stimuli sets them off and they do not easily habituate to or learn to ignore any stimuli that arouses them. Dogs with GAD do relax and sleep, but they have to be in places they deem secure. Unlike dogs with separation anxiety, these dogs have no pattern to what arouses them. You may feel like they react to everything.

Hyperactivity/Hyperkinesia

Hyperactive dogs like overactive dogs seem to always be ready for an adventure. However, the difference is that a hyperactive dog cannot be “satisfied” with increased activity and their stimulation level is higher than other dogs, i.e., they can never settle down and appear to be more easily aroused. These dogs will most likely have elevated baseline heart rates, respiratory rates, and body temperatures and dilated pupils (signs of sympathetic system arousal) even when they are resting and may resent being restrained.

Hyper-reactivity

Hyper-reactivity like hyperactivity involves sympathetic arousal, but hyper-reactive dogs only become aroused in response to a stimulus, whereas hyperactive dogs are aroused even while resting. Hyper-reactive dogs usually react to even the smallest of stimuli and signs can include vocalization, extreme motor activity, inattention to signals, and lack of focus. Stimulation is internal for these dogs, and they go through cycles of arousal and calm. Hyper-reactive dogs

appear to lack focus because they cannot help reacting to things in extreme and out of context ways. These are not overactive dogs with inadequate exercise or dogs with GAD exhibit that vigilance and scanning in any stimulating environment.

Attention-seeking Behaviour

Not all attention-seeking behaviour is problematic. It is when your dog becomes distressed and must use vocal or physical behaviours to obtain attention that the attention-seeking behaviour turns into a problem. Common signs of problematic attention-seeking behaviour include vocalizing, jumping, pawing/grabbing, and chewing on things. These dogs will become more distressed the longer they have to seek attention and appear to never be “satisfied” with the amount of attention you are giving them.

It can be hard to distinguish between the 5 types of “activity” because the signs for the types can be very similar or overlap. Below is a chart to help visualize what signs can correlate with the different “activity” types.

	Can settle	Diarrhea may be common	Signs of sympathetic arousal when resting	Vigilance and monitoring	Resolves with increased exercise	Distress is a primary sign
Overactive	X				X	
GAD		X		X		X
Hyperactive/hyperkinesia			X			
Hyper-reactive	X					<i>Not initially</i>
Attention-seeking behavior	X	X				X

Chart by Dr. Karen Overall

Ok, I think I know what type of “activity” my dog is, what next?

Management is first! There are different strategies to managing your dog’s reactivity depending on what type of “active” dog they are. For example, if your dog is an overactive dog, try to take them on longer walks, increasing the number of short walks, or taking them to the dog park to run around and burn off some of their energy. If your dog has GAD or hyper-reactivity, talk to your veterinarian. Medication is recommended to facilitate learning calmer behaviours. If your dog has problematic attention-seeking behaviour that is not pathological, getting help from a humane, positive reinforcement trainer may be a good strategy. Regardless of the type of “activity” your dog may elicit, there are numerous strategies to help keep you and your dog thriving.

Although these tips are helpful, please discuss any behavioural/medical concerns with your local veterinarian. For all cases where you still have concerns, seek specialist services (www.dacvb.org). At AVC you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upeu.ca).

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