

RUNNING WITH YOUR WEIMARANER

by Pam Goodley



Running with a Weimaraner can be great for both you and the dog. However, there are several issues to be aware of to ensure that it's a pleasant experience for you, and a healthy and safe event for your dog.

When can your Weimaraner start running with you? Veterinarians advise waiting until 18 months of age to do distance running with your dog. Why wait? Although your Weim may reach close to full size by about 10 months of age, inside, she is still growing, developing and strengthening her muscles, bones, and joints. Starting before 18 months of age can impair the proper development of the dog – which may not be apparent until after she is 2 or 3 years old.

Of course you'll want to take your Weim on walks and even short jog/walks before she's 18 months, but keep the distance short (less than 2 miles). Begin with short distances, building up the distance covered. This also gives your dog's pads time to toughen while she is improving her conditioning and endurance.

You've adopted an adult Weimaraner – so he's ready to do all of your runs with you, right? Not necessarily! If the dog has been kept inside or crated night and day, his pads may not be sufficiently toughened to sustain the miles you plan on running. He also may not be in the cardiovascular and muscular condition necessary to keep up with you on the miles you normally run. It's best to start with minimum mileage and build up gradually, just as you did when you started running. Also, if the dog is overweight, it's going to be tougher on him, just as it is for humans. The running will be great exercise for the dog, but initially you'll need to accommodate the dog's less than optimal condition. Be patient, and soon enough you'll have a happy, healthy running partner capable of staying with you on all of your runs.

Training your Weim to run with you. Start with going to obedience classes – hopefully something you had planned anyway! You don't want to compete in Obedience trials, so why go through the training? You'll want to teach your dog to heel so that he runs at your left side, and doesn't cut back and forth in front or behind you. This also helps you to be a courteous runner if you're on a bike path, where you run on the left shoulder facing bike traffic. If your dog is on your left, he is out of the way of oncoming cyclists. A Weim is “a lot of dog” and obedience training is a must.

In obedience training, you will learn that “heel” is a very specific position for your dog. If you want to have the heeling a little more relaxed on your run, try using a different word, such as “left,” so that your dog knows to be on your left side, not too much in front or behind you, but understanding that a perfect heel position isn't demanded.

Your Weim may want to pull on the leash – a common trait of many dogs. Practice walks with your dog where you walk straight ahead, then, when your Weim isn't paying attention to you, turn around or turn right. Your dog will get a “pop” at the end of the leash, then IMMEDIATELY upon him catching back up to you, reward with praise and a treat. This will help the dog learn to pay attention to you. Focus on reinforcing good behavior, not punishing inappropriate behavior. Remember, too, that this will take a lot of work, so have patience! And if your Weim is a pup, be gentle with the little one.

Carry small treats with you - something like Old Mother Hubbard's “Bitz” or “Meaties” (available at stores like Petsmart) are small enough to fit in the pocket of running shorts - and use the treats to reinforce proper position and good behavior.

Equipment & extras:

A leash and collar are a must for your dog, along with a few other items depending on the weather and your location.

Leash:

A four-foot or six-foot leash is important. You want to have control over your dog, at any time, but especially when you're at a running pace. (Additionally, many areas have leash laws.) Plus, if you run near other runners, walkers or cyclists, you want a short enough leash to keep your pooch from tripping up others. There are hands-free leashes available that you strap around your waist that can work well (available at some running stores and pet stores). However, these require having done some proper obedience training first, so that your Weim will stay at your left.

Baggies:

If you're running in your neighborhood or on a path where others will walk or run, be a good dog ambassador and clean up after your dog relieves himself. As much as we all love our dogs, NONE of us like to step in their poop! Those little plastic grocery bags can be folded into very tiny squares to fit in your pocket, or tied to a leash.

Water:

In warmer weather (and remember, your dog heats up quickly at a running or trotting pace) you'll want to make sure you can have water available for your dog. Some people teach their dogs to drink from a water bottle (which you can carry for your dog in a runner's belted bottle carrier). You can also get one of the small collapsible water bowls, although you have to determine the way to carry it while you run. (Suggestions: put it in the fanny pack where you'd carry a bottle if you aren't bringing a bottle for yourself. Or, get running shorts with side pockets. Or, strap it to the waist of a hands-free leash.)

Collars:

As far as collars go, there are a lot of opinions on the different types of collars available. Many people go with the "prong" collars, which can be quite effective, and are actually more humane (and more effective) than the standard "choke" chain. Also popular are the "headcollars" such as Halti and Gentle Leader. With a more mature, well-trained

Weim, you can even consider going to the standard "flat" collar. But with only a flat collar, be prepared to not have the "tools" you'll need if your Weim is not very well trained. A big strong Weim is a lot to control if you have only a flat collar on him or her.

Pepper spray:

Lastly, carrying pepper spray is something you might consider, depending on where you run. Not only can you use it against a human assailant, you can use it on a loose dog that may aggressively approach you and your dog. Although these occurrences are rare, you don't want to be in the middle of a dog fight. Sadly, too many people let their dogs that aren't under voice control off leash, or you may encounter an aggressive, loose dog in your neighborhood.

How far can your Weim run with you?

Again, start with short distances with your Weim, just as you started your running. Your dog needs a chance to develop its cardiovascular and muscular fitness just as all runners do when starting out.

The distance your Weim can run with you will depend on the dog's age, the outside temperature, and the fitness of the dog. Increase mileage gradually, again, just as human runners are advised. There are Weims that have worked up to running the marathon distance with their human training partners. Remember, though, to build up gradually, and always plan stops for your Weim to get properly hydrated, especially in warm weather.

Health considerations and problems you might encounter:

Aside from not starting your Weim at too young of an age, you should be aware of other issues that can affect your dog when out running. You owe it to your Weim to consistently monitor her condition during your runs. This is especially important in warm or hot weather. Remember, your Weim can't perspire to cool herself, and her body temperature can easily elevate to dangerous – even fatal – levels.

Heatstroke can be suffered by a rise of just 3 degrees of your dog's normal temperature. Watch for rapid breathing, dry mouth and nose, and increased heart rate. If the dog's temperature continues to rise, the dog

may suffer collapse, vomiting, seizures, or even death. Don't let your dog reach the early stages, but if it happens, try to cool her in water as soon as possible. Even if the dog appears to recover, veterinary examination is a must, as damage to internal organs can occur which may not be initially detectable.

Other outdoor hazards include foxtails and poisonous snakes, such as the Western rattlesnake. Foxtails look like a very small version of their name – like a tiny foxtail. It is sharply pointed at one end, with microscopic barbs on it. A foxtail can be accidentally inhaled by a sniffing Weimaraner, or become lodged in the pad of the foot. Because of its structure, it will move in only one direction if it enters the dog – the direction of the sharp point. From there it can move into the brain, or into other organs of the body. It can even lodge inside the dog somewhere, creating an abscess and infection not necessarily noticeable until the dog becomes ill from the infection. In some cases, foxtails that get lodged internally can be fatal. You will very likely know if a foxtail has been inhaled by your Weim, as violent sneezing will result. If the foxtail is picked up in the foot, you may notice your dog limping, or later licking the foot. If you cannot remove the foxtail (and this is difficult, if not impossible if it's in the nose), get your dog to a veterinarian. It is important to get the foxtail removed from the dog, wherever it may have traveled. This situation should be considered as an emergency.

Rattlesnake bites are poisonous to both humans and dogs. Remember that even a large dog like a Weim weighs a lot less than you weigh. Rattlesnake venom can kill your dog. If the dog is bitten, get the dog to the vet immediately. This is an emergency, and not getting treatment will very likely result in severe illness, and likely death of the dog. If you're in an area with poisonous snakes, keep the dog leashed and always watch your path.

Where to run with your Weim?

You can typically take your Weim with you just about any place you run. However, if you race, do respect race rules that don't allow dogs. Although most race directors won't pull someone off the course who has a dog, it's part of being a good dog ambassador to respect the rules.

For training, when you run in your neighborhood, be sure to have that baggie to clean up after your dog. You don't want to give a bad name to dog owners AND runners by leaving your Weim's pile on someone's lawn.

If you live near mountain or forest trails, you and your Weim can enjoy some spectacular runs together. If you're in an area with rattlesnakes, do remain aware during "snake season" so that you don't end up with an emergency trip to the vet (see previous information on snakes). Also, depending on the region, watch out for ticks and poison oak. Poison oak oil from your dog's coat can rub off on you. And keep an eye on your dog to see if he or she starts to limp, as a sticker may have gotten stuck in his pad. If you're in an area with ticks, inspect your dog thoroughly after your run and immediately remove any ticks.

Racing With your Weim:

As mentioned before, if you want to participate in running races with your dog, please be a good "dog ambassador" and follow race rules where dogs are not allowed. However, luckily many communities offer races where dogs are allowed. Watch for races, such as the Sacramento SPCA Doggy Dash, which not only allow, but also encourage, our canine athletes to participate.

The races can be a lot of fun, and it's pretty amazing seeing dozens and dozens of dogs together, all getting along relatively well. If you're a competitive person, remember that your dog may not have done the "speed-work" that you've trained with to compete, so race day with your dog is a day on which you may have to compromise your goals in order to ensure your dog's good health.

