

Life under COVID-19 restrictions for Ireland's dog Population



Walking on roads and pavements, in most cases, results in 'on lead only' exercise.

Dr CL Corridan BVMS PhD MRCVS discusses what changes in society and individual household routines, brought about by COVID-19 restrictions, have meant for dogs

Dogs over two years of age, established in pet owners' lives in the pre-COVID world, have spent the equivalent of more than six years of our human lifetime living with social isolation, restricted movements and having their 'human' families home for most of the day. Puppies and newly-adopted dogs will experience equivalent restrictions but without the benefit of previous learning, to help them adjust to the expected changes in the post-lockdown world.

Trips to veterinary clinics over the past 15 months have been increasingly stressful for everyone. Owners have been asked to wait in their cars; patients have been handled by veterinary staff wearing PPE; and there has been limited time or opportunity for the 'niceties' associated with 'low stress handling' which were increasing in both awareness and popularity pre-COVID.

EFFECTS OF COVID RESTRICTIONS

The impact of these changes may present in a number of ways depending on the adaptations dog owners have made in their attempts to adapt to the COVID restrictions and the individual personalities and experience of the dogs themselves. Some dogs may have had very limited exercise away from

their own home or garden, while others have been walked more frequently and for longer because their owners had the time to do so. The 5km restrictions resulted in many city dogs being exercised in a limited number of locations, increasing social pressure (predominantly scent but visual and auditory also) at the same time as reducing opportunities for intraspecific (dog: dog) interactions. Rural dogs may have experienced similar limitations as popular parks and outdoor recreation sites were closed.

Walking on roads and pavements, in most cases, results in 'on lead only' exercise. Dogs generally behave better when off lead and given the opportunity to make their own decisions, particularly in response to unfamiliar people or other dogs. Road safety, livestock protection and social distancing responsibilities reduced the opportunity for such 'off lead' freedom. Many dogs have become increasingly frustrated by their owners' avoidance of other people and dogs, and the resultant owner anxiety, projected verbally or via the lead, will no doubt have exacerbated matters.

The absence of visitors and the lack of visits to other people's homes has further limited opportunities to practice social skills. For dogs, practising socialisation skills with both

unfamiliar people and other dogs, is fundamental, if they are to retain their confidence in doing so.

As a result of many dog owners working from home, the prevalence of each of the commonly reported behavioural problems in dogs will be skewed, the most serious of these problems being owner-directed aggression. Increased frustration, lack of mental, as well as physical, stimulation and reduced boundaries, as dog and owner spend more time in a limited amount of space, has resulted in an increase in reported resource-guarding and status-related aggression in some dogs.

In the UK, research conducted by the Dogs Trust indicates that they expect 40,000 dogs to be abandoned as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. From a sample of 6,000 dog owners, 82% reported an increase in dogs barking or whining when someone was busy; 54% saw an increase in dogs hiding or moving away from people; and 41% say they witnessed an increase in 'clingy' behaviours or following people all of the time.

Neotonisation of companion dogs has resulted in an increase in reported anxiety and separation-related disorders, particularly for dogs who sleep in their owner's bedroom at night. Learning independence and self-reliance is a fundamental skill for every young dog, but very difficult to achieve when they are with their owner 24/7. Most, though not all, companion dogs will opt to spend time in close proximity to their owners when given the opportunity. Freedom to choose is key in enhancing this aspect of canine welfare. If they need space and time alone, they need that option to be available to them. This is particularly important for older dogs or those experiencing chronic pain.

Trips to the veterinary clinic throughout the pandemic have fluctuated hugely. Many owners have been opting to avoid all but essential trips to the vet, for their own safety. Treatment for non-emergent conditions was postponed initially as team numbers and practice capacity were reduced due to social distancing, limiting the services that could be offered. Pets signed up to practice health plans may have fared better, in terms of prophylactic care, as owners ventured out to collect their medication entitlements.

Leaving pet owners in the car park; handling by veterinary staff in protective clothing and face masks; time spent waiting while histories and treatment plans are discussed with owners via telephone, rather than in the room with the pet – all these COVID-related changes have added to the inevitable stress of veterinary visits. Previous good work with puppy socialisation classes, veterinary nursing clinics and 'victory visits' (desensitisation and counter conditioning for anxiety in the veterinary practice) to habituate to the veterinary clinic, may be long forgotten, and in some cases, totally reversed.

COVID-19 has resulted in numerous households acquiring a dog – households that would not have done so otherwise. Barriers to dog ownership for dog lovers are primarily time, restriction on freedom of movement and the costs associated with 'responsible dog ownership'. All of these barriers are significantly reduced if dog owners are working from home, with no commute. They are unable to go



As COVID restrictions reduce and many employees return to work, albeit on a slightly altered schedule, these new circumstances will start to present problems for many novel dog owners and the impact will be felt most acutely by the dogs themselves.

anywhere to do anything non-essential and there is no need to pay dog walkers/dog daycare/dog boarding because they are available to care for their dog 24/7 themselves. As the restrictions reduce and many employees return to work, albeit on a slightly altered schedule, these barriers will start to present problems for many novel dog owners and the impact will be felt most acutely by the dogs themselves. Supply and demand during COVID has resulted in a shortage of available dogs, inflation of puppy prices and desperate 'potential owners' sourcing puppies or dogs from 'less than ideal' sources that ordinarily would never have been considered. Puppy owners report fear of taking their puppies for walks in case the local area is being 'scouted' by potential 'dog kidnappers'. Stories of garden gates and fencing 'marked' with coloured ribbons or cable ties, to indicate a dog or dogs in the garden have also been prevalent on social media. There have also been reports of adult bitches being picked up in vans and later abandoned at the side of the road some distance away, after a spay wound scar has identified that they cannot be used for breeding. There is now likely to be a large cohort of juvenile dogs who have been selected for 'availability' as opposed to temperament and kept in isolation in homes and gardens, without any habituation to novel environments or experiences. Their novel intraspecific (dog: dog) and, most worryingly, interspecific (dog: human) social skills are at best reduced and at worst, non-existent.

BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES

In the short term, we can expect an increase in all of the commonly-reported dog behavioural issues:

- aggression (both dog and human-directed), fear and anxiety, all of which can be the result of lack of socialisation and habituation;
- toilet training issues, because owners have been available to let their dogs outdoors throughout the day;

- general obedience and training issues, because puppy socialisation and dog training classes have been cancelled or put on hold and online training has its limitations;
- separation-related disorders as dogs are suddenly expected to cope home alone for extended periods of time; and,
- repetitive or obsessive behaviours (pacing, excessive licking/grooming, chewing or destructive behaviours) as the dogs themselves attempt to self-regulate and alleviate stress.

Dogs from six months to two years of age have always been at highest risk of relinquishment and euthanasia. The recent explosion in popularity of acquiring a puppy or new dog and then the reality faced when owners return to workplaces and packed schedules, combined with the novelty of dog ownership wearing off, means we can anticipate even higher numbers of abandoned, relinquished and euthanased juvenile dogs. The veterinary profession can choose to embrace these circumstances as an opportunity to regain our rightful place as the primary, trusted source of information on the health and wellbeing of companion dogs, offering both advice and solutions for our clients.

A ROLE FOR VIRTUAL CONSULTATION?

Veterinary telemedicine, whether you are for or against, may have a role to play in ensuring veterinary practices in Ireland are available and equipped to tackle an increased demand for behavioural advice. Virtual consultations allow the practice to impart the key information for dog owners without bringing increasingly anxious dogs into the clinic. Charging for veterinary nurse consultations has always been essential but charging for virtual veterinary nurse consultations has also hopefully become the norm during the pandemic.

Veterinary nurses who are willing, trained and gifted at client communication, may prove invaluable in dealing with behaviour-related enquiries from veterinary clients over the coming months. Embracing this opportunity to provide reliable information for behavioural prophylaxis as well as first aid management of behavioural issues is arguably more important and should save more canine lives than worming, flea prevention and neutering advice combined. The veterinary profession has shied away from charging for telephone advice, but a virtual face-to-face consult, which takes the same amount of veterinary or veterinary nursing time, is easier to justify.

The key messages to convey to dog owners, which will improve the welfare of all of our canine patients, are listed in Figure 1.

- **Understand the importance of individual differences and preferences – find out what each dog likes and dislikes, then provide more of the positive and find strategies to manage the negatives;**
- **Encourage independence in dogs of all ages – this has to be trained and practised just like every other life skill in dogs;**
- **Provide mental stimulation appropriate for the dog's age, breed and health status:**
- **Provide physical stimulation, both at home and away, as well as with and without the owner's presence, appropriate for the dog's age, breed and health status; and,**
- **Reintroduce habituation training, as you would do with a new puppy, irrespective of the age of dog involved – the same theories apply, and the pace is set by the individual dog.**

Figure 1. Key advice for dog owners on improving canine welfare as we gradually emerge from COVID restrictions.

Dogs need to be trained to cope with a variety of situations, people and places and not be limited to their home and garden otherwise they fail to develop the emotional resilience they need to adapt to change in the future. People's circumstances change: moving house, adding or losing family members, adding or losing other pets. In a normal world, people also like to go away for the weekend or on holiday and their pets are expected to cope in their absence. Every dog should be emotionally equipped to deal with a normal degree of novelty and change, so long as their fundamental needs are being met.

Setting up 'socialisation classes' (not limited to puppies but ideally grouped by age and/or size) can definitely help novice dog owners learn the confidence and canine body language skills they need to re-introduce their dogs into normal society. Victory visits for dogs whose only experience of the veterinary clinic involved 'car park medicine' during lockdown, will help ensure those dogs are less traumatised by future visits. This is not only essential for their own welfare, if they are to tolerate routine health checks, physical examinations and the treatments they need, but also makes sound business sense. Stressed and embarrassed clients of fearful/aggressive dogs will avoid veterinary practice visits unless absolutely essential. Increased and, most importantly, positive visits to the clinic will improve owner compliance, increase opportunities for client engagement and increase sales, to the benefit of all those involved. Use of the human:dog bonding scale, using a satisfaction scale of one to 10 to triage behavioural cases, might be an easy way of determining if clients can be supported by first opinion clinics, or if referral to a suitably qualified dog trainer, pet behaviour counsellor or veterinary behaviour consultant will be required.

CONCLUSIONS

Dog shelters and rescue organisations are already experiencing the 'fall-out' from the COVID-19 'dog boom'. This is compounded by reduced funding as fund raising activities were put on hold during lockdown, and there were reduced opportunities for adoptions as shelters had to close to the public.

The impact of lack of mental stimulation, socialisation and exercise will be experienced equally by dogs both young and old, just in slightly different ways.

The solutions for reintroducing social interactions, and acceptance of novel experiences and environments, will be the same for dogs of any age and will require adequate time, knowledge, patience and understanding from their owners.

Companion animal veterinary practices are uniquely placed, with the expertise, resources and opportunities, to help advise dog owners on both behavioural prophylaxis and problem resolution, before relinquishment or euthanasia become a consideration for those owners.

References are available on request.