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Does long-term tethering of dogs negatively impact their well-being?

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Introduction

Veterinary care, appropriate housing, adequate food and water supply, and a safe environment are all crucial for maintaining a dog's health and overall welfare. Considering an animal's behavioral needs is also extremely important. Behavioral needs come from internal motivations, and welfare is threatened if animals are prevented from engaging in behaviors they are strongly motivated to perform for a long period of time (Friend, 1989). Examples of behavioral needs in dogs are exercising and experiencing social interactions with each other.

Housing environments and management practices that involve long-term restriction of animal behaviors have come under scrutiny and raised concerns about animal welfare. The use of tethering as a practice to contain or restrict dog movement has become increasingly controversial for these reasons. Tethering involves securing an animal to a stationary object with a line that can vary in material and length. The animal can be secured for varying periods of time, with or without supervision.

Some argue that tethering restricts the number of behaviors that dogs can perform and their ability to explore and fully use their environments. For example, it limits their ability to escape dangerous situations, such as adverse weather conditions or threats from other animals. Others suggest that tethering of dogs, in combination with insufficient socialization as a result of such confinement, could be a risk factor for biting (Gershman, Sacks, & Wright, 1994). The possibility exists that physical injuries may occur because of these conditions, and because of the potential for dogs to become entangled in the tether itself or other objects (Animal Welfare Institute, n.d.). In some U.S. states it is considered a form of neglect if a dog is tethered for more than a brief period of time and the tether does not meet specific criteria (Indiana General Assembly, 2019).

However, some argue that the benefits of tethering outweigh potential adverse consequences. For example, short-term tethering is considered a useful tool for supervising or giving a "timeout" to puppies (Miller, 2004). Many in the sled dog community support tethering, and at the moment this is where the majority of our information about tethering dogs originates. Mushers use tethering for many reasons, including its economic benefit (as opposed to fencing), the freedom it gives dogs to interact with their environments and handlers (Mush With P.R.I.D.E., 2009), its practicality when on trails, and its prevention of dog fights (Yeon et al., 2010). Anecdotally, tethering sled dogs allows for individualized care at kennel operations that maintain them; tethering also offers a simple way to keep track of dogs, and a housing system the dogs cannot dig out of or climb over. Tethers may have become popular with some mushers because it was once believed that sled dogs on tethers had higher levels of activity, and therefore improved speed, based on observations of weight gain when moved to pens (Kerstiens, 1983 cited by Delude, 1991). However, scientific evidence now suggests that tethering does not have this benefit (Delude, 1991). Given the diverse viewpoints on tethering, it is important to evaluate how the practice impacts a dog's overall physiological and behavioral welfare, so as to inform decisions about when and under what conditions it may be appropriate.

How tethering is implemented

Dogs are tethered in a variety of ways for many different purposes. As mentioned above, one of the most common uses for tethering is to permit individual housing for dogs. According to Mush with P.R.I.D.E., an organization that provides widely accepted standards for the care of sled dogs, certain guidelines should be followed to ensure safety when tethering. For example, it suggests that tethers should always be attached to a rotation device or "swivel" to prevent tangling, dogs should be given 5 to 7 feet of tether to ensure adequate movement, and tethering posts should be spaced to ensure tangling does not occur due to overlapping chains (Mush With P.R.I.D.E., 2009). It is important to note that these guidelines are not based on published scientific literature because no studies exist that could be used to inform them. Furthermore, these guidelines are suggested for high-energy sled dogs and may not be broadly applicable to other dogs, including, for example, low-energy companion dogs.

Companion dogs may be tethered for a variety of reasons, including allowing time outside when fencing – due perhaps to high costs, neighborhood restrictions, or the dog's ability to escape fenced enclosures – is not an option. Tethering of dogs has been used in more restrictive ways in research environments to ensure reliable monitoring of physiological metrics (Kearns, Better, Daley, & Anderson, 1981). One method involves using a flexible dog harness attached to a 44-inch-tall apparatus constructed of crossbars and metal "hangers" (Anderson, Daley, Findley, & Brady, 1970). When in the harness, the dog is maintained in a constant direction, and is able to eat, drink, sit, lie down, and stand.

Overall, the way tethering is implemented depends on the level of physical restriction required for the intended purpose. Clearly, one universal procedure should not be applied to every breed or working class of dog.

Effects of tethering on animal welfare

One reason for concern about tethering of dogs is that long-term tethering – meaning there is no, or limited, time spent off tethers – has been identified as potentially detrimental to animal welfare in several species. For example, a study on pig housing showed that pregnant pigs had higher levels of stress hormones (corticosteroids) when housed using neck tethers and limited access to neighbors, compared to pigs who were untethered and group housed (Barnett, Hemsworth, Winfield, & Fahy, 1987). Tethered pigs also had more aggressive interactions with their neighbors than did group-housed pigs.

Another study evaluated the effects of heart rates in swivel-tethered cynomolgus monkeys. When monkeys were tethered alone, they showed persistent elevations in their heart rates compared to when they were untethered in pair and group housing, suggesting they were experiencing chronic stress (Adams, Kaplan, Manuck, Uberseder, & Larkin, 1988). It is important to note, however, that it is not possible to determine whether the problematic effects noted were due to the use of the tether itself or because the tethered animals were also isolated. To clarify, future research should compare the responses of animals that are tethered and housed individually to animals serving as controls in identical housing conditions that are housed individually but untethered.

Not many studies have examined the impacts of tether and pen housing on dog behavior and welfare. Yeon et al. (2010) looked at the activity of a group of Alaskan sled dogs that switched from tethered to individual pen housing. Dogs could visually but not physically interact with each other in both types of housing. Dogs were just as active in both housing types, but there were significantly less stereotypic behaviors (i.e., circling and pacing) on tethers than in pens. These behaviors are often associated with animals having difficulty coping with environments that do not fully meet their needs and therefore are often considered signs of poor welfare. Despite this finding, Yeon et al. (2010) did not observe any other differences in behavior that suggested poor welfare in tethered dogs. They concluded that there was no evidence that tethering negatively impacted welfare more than pen housing of dogs did. They did suggest, though, that the dogs' familiarity with being tethered may have impacted their stress responses (or lack thereof). Additionally, in the previously mentioned study that tethered dogs for research purposes, dogs did not show abnormal patterns in sleep or food and water intake while tethered. Of course, these dogs could not display stereotypic behaviors even if they wanted to due to the restrictive nature of their tethering. However, no additional measures of welfare were recorded (Anderson et al., 1970). More research using a wider variety of appropriate metrics and diverse breeds and working classes of dogs is needed to draw a firm conclusion about the welfare implications for long-term tethering of dogs.

Overall, evidence in several species suggests that long-term tethering of animals may be detrimental to welfare. Similar concerns exist for dogs, especially since their responses to long- and short-term tethering have not yet been robustly studied. It is often pointed out that dogs are pack animals and require socialization, exercise, and the opportunity to perform natural behaviors to sustain positive welfare (Coppinger et al., 2001). Therefore, future research should focus on the effects of tethering on dogs' abilities to engage in behaviors that are typical for their species and that they are strongly motivated to perform. In addition, their physiological responses should be evaluated to determine if tethering is an appropriate means of securing them in the long term.

Conclusion

Arguments can be made both in favor of and against the tethering of dogs. Dogs' preferences for different methods of confinement, including tethering, should be considered while also looking at each method's effectiveness. Further study is needed to better understand how tethering impacts overall dog welfare. More specifically, researchers must consider factors such as the length and weight of the tether, the length of time a dog is tethered, the dog's familiarity with being tethered, and how tethers influence dog behavior and physiology. Doing so may allow dog owners and other decision-makers the opportunity to make better informed decisions about the potential welfare merits and drawbacks of tethering.

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