

Let's Go For a Walk

You're taking yet another long drive on the turnpike. Thank goodness for the company of your dog. You're tired of driving, spot a sign for a rest area and decide that both you and your dog could use a break. You slow the car and like magic your dog perks up and knows there's a walk in the offing.

The rest area is long and narrow but has designated dog areas with plenty of grass and trees. The sidewalk runs the full length of the rest area and you walk your dog to the far end of the grassy, dog walking area. Then you spot them. A couple with a less than well-behaved dog is coming your way. The people aren't paying much attention to the dog and the dog, which is on a retractable leash, is running circles around them. The dog darts between the parked cars and toward the moving traffic. There's the sound of screaming brakes. You're afraid to look. Disaster is averted, but by only mere inches. The dog is reeled in but not before tangling the people in the leash's cord. What could have been a deadly encounter turned into a lot of fussing and fuming, with the people blaming the whole incident on the dog's behavior.

Being ignorant of how and when to use a retractable leash is a formula for disaster.

In the incident I described (and which I witnessed on the PA Turnpike), you had people improperly using equipment and a dog that wasn't well trained for leash walking. Retractable leashes can be used safely. They give your dog more freedom of movement and with proper use they are a wonderful convenience to you.

Considering the size and strength of our dogs there are a few basics for safe use of retractable leashes:

First, the dog needs good walking manners and the ability to respond to voice commands. Once a dog is trained to walk on a 6 foot lead then, and only then, should a retractable leash be considered.

For added control, I train my dogs to know when they are about to come to the end of their retractable lead. I use an "easy" command to tell them that they are about to come to the end of their leash and if they charge ahead they'll literally run out of line and get yanked off their feet. They quickly learn this command and it lessens the chance of injuring your dog. Sudden yanks and screeching halts can cause neck and spinal injuries to your dog.

Second, the person walking the dog has to have sufficient strength to deal with the unexpected which can set even the well trained dog on an unintended course. Prey drive, coupled with lightning fast reflexes can have most dogs in fast pursuit of suicidal squirrels or errant cats that dash into your path. The person with the leash has to have sufficient strength and reaction time to cope.

Third, never grab the cord in an attempt to stop a dog. The cord can give horrendous friction burns, bruises and cuts.

Finally, never allow slack in the cord. Allowing slack increases the possibility of you or your dog getting tangled and many accidents have occurred in the untangling process. A sudden pull and the cord becomes a cutting tool.

Remember that when you put your dog on a retractable leash, he has the full circumference of a circle. Just because you are headed in one direction, there's no reason he can't suddenly change direction and be yards off your course. We all know that retractable leashes give more freedom but they also increase the possibility of accidents. Consider how you use your retractable leash and be safe for sake of yourself and your dog.

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