



If you are thinking of taking on a dog or a puppy, make sure that you've researched their welfare needs and you're committed to taking care of them for life. Please also think about giving a home to some of the many rescue dogs available for adoption at RSPCA animal centres across England and Wales.

Some rescue dogs prefer to live without other pets, while others are great with children or other pets so our staff take great care to make sure each dog goes to the right home. Every dog we rehome is neutered to prevent unwanted pregnancies, and microchipped to give them the best chance of being identified if they get lost or stolen.

[www.rspca.org.uk/rehoming](http://www.rspca.org.uk/rehoming)

**This booklet will help you find out what dogs need to stay healthy and happy.**



- ENVIRONMENT
- DIET
- BEHAVIOUR
- COMPANY
- HEALTH & WELFARE

HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR

Keeping your dog healthy and happy

dog

[www.rspca.org.uk/dogs](http://www.rspca.org.uk/dogs)



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## HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR

# dog

Keeping your  
dog healthy  
and happy

Owning and caring for a dog can be great fun and very rewarding, but it's a big responsibility and a long-term commitment in terms of care and cost – typically, dogs live for around 12 years, but many may live for much longer.

If you own or are responsible for a dog, even on a temporary basis, you are required by law to care for them properly.



There is no one 'perfect' way to care for all dogs because every dog is individual and every situation is different! It's up to you how you look after your dog, but you must take reasonable steps to ensure that you meet all of their needs.

**Under the Animal Welfare Act, pet owners are legally obliged to provide for the following five welfare needs.**

- 1 A suitable place to live.
- 2 A healthy diet, including fresh clean water.
- 3 The ability to behave normally.
- 4 Appropriate company, including any need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals.
- 5 Protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

This booklet  
will help you to find  
out more about what  
your dog needs to  
stay healthy  
and happy.

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# Environment

## MAKE SURE YOUR DOG HAS A SUITABLE PLACE TO LIVE

Dogs are highly social and intelligent so if they get bored, and don't have enough to do, they can suffer. You need to make sure your dog can exercise outdoors every day, play and interact with people or other dogs (if appropriate). Your dog also needs the opportunity to go to the toilet every few hours. They are inquisitive and playful, so try to make sure there are plenty of entertaining toys or activities.



### Home comforts

When they're not having fun playing or out on a walk, dogs and puppies need a comfortable, dry, draught-free, clean and quiet place to snooze in. Always look out for a bed that is easy to clean and big enough to allow your dog to go through their natural routine of turning around before settling. Make sure that it's the right size and made of material that is safe for them. In addition to their bed, they also need a 'safe haven' – somewhere they can go to rest undisturbed and feel safe in.



Your dog will need lots of suitable objects to chew and play with. If you have more than one dog, you need to make sure there is always sufficient water for them all, as well as enough toys, beds, and hiding places to go round to reduce the chances of any unwanted disagreements and keep them all happy.



### Dog crates

Dog crates are widely available and can provide an open 'den' area which some dogs like to use as a safe haven where they feel secure. They can also be used as a training aid to help puppies to learn to be left alone or with toilet training – but crates should never be used as a punishment or to prevent unwanted behaviour. Sometimes a vet may advise the use of a crate to help recovery after surgery and they can also be used to keep dogs secure and comfortable while they are travelling.

- Download our factsheet on *Dog crates* at: [www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/environment/crates](http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/environment/crates)

### Keeping dogs outside

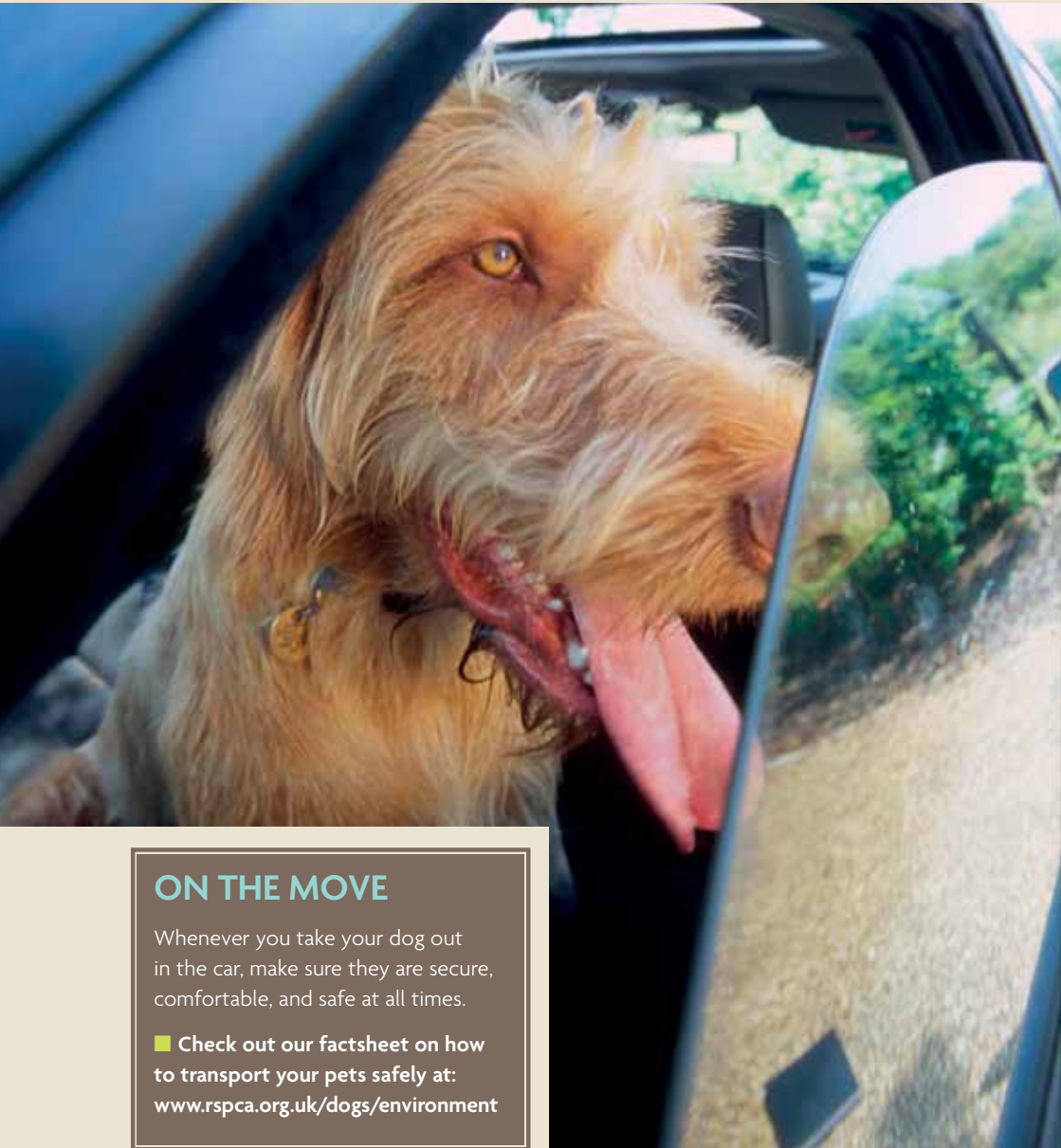
The RSPCA advises against keeping dogs outside because it can be very difficult, if not impossible, to meet their complex physical, social and behavioural needs.

You may be thinking of keeping your dog outside because of a behaviour problem – for example, toilet training or chewing – which is preventing you keeping them in the house. If this is the case, always talk to your vet first, to rule out any underlying health reasons for the behaviour. You may then be referred to a clinical animal behaviourist for further help.

- For more information on clinical animal behaviourists see page 18.
- If you still want to keep your dog outside, you can find out more about what to consider at: [www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/environment/livingoutside](http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/environment/livingoutside)



Angela Hampton (x2), Becky Murray, Chris Brignell, Alison Stalwood/RSPCA Photolibraryxk



## ON THE MOVE

Whenever you take your dog out in the car, make sure they are secure, comfortable, and safe at all times.

■ Check out our factsheet on how to transport your pets safely at: [www.rspca.org.uk/dogs/environment](http://www.rspca.org.uk/dogs/environment)

Andrew Forsyth, Andrew Linscott/RSPCA Photolibrary

## Never leave your dog alone in a car on a warm day

Many people still believe that it's ok to leave a dog in a car on a warm day if the windows are left open or they're parked in the shade, but the truth is, it's still a very dangerous situation for the dog. They are likely to experience distress and discomfort, and sadly, every summer dogs die in hot cars.

It can get unbearably hot in a car, even when it doesn't feel that warm outside. In fact, when it's 22°C/72°F outside, the temperature inside a car can soar to 47°C/117°F within sixty minutes.

Please don't take the risk – never leave your dog alone in a car on a warm day.

If you want to take your dog with you on a car journey, make sure that your destination

is dog-friendly – you won't be able to leave your dog in the car and you don't want your day out to be ruined! If you go on a long journey, make sure they get regular stops to have a drink, exercise and go to the toilet.

■ If you see a dog in distress in a hot car, please call the police on 999.

## Dogs Die on Hot Walks Too...

Every year dogs are at risk of suffering heat related illness following exercise in hot weather. From sun stroke, to overheating to burning pads on scorching pavements, dogs can suffer when the warning signs are missed or they are exercised too much, or too fast, in hot conditions.

■ Learn more about the risks of hot walks at: [www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/health/hotwalks](http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/health/hotwalks) – but if in doubt don't go out.



## Top tips for summer

- Ensure pets always have access to shade and fresh drinking water to help keep them cool.
- Never leave animals in hot cars, conservatories, outbuildings or caravans, even if it's just for a short while.

- Exercise dogs early in the morning and late evening when temperatures are cooler.
  - Avoid over-exercising dogs in warm weather and avoid encouraging them to over-exert themselves when playing.
  - If you know your dog has an underlying condition, then take extra care in hot weather or consider skipping walks altogether.
- Find out more about heatstroke early warning signs and first aid advice at: [www.rspca.org.uk/dogsinhotcars](http://www.rspca.org.uk/dogsinhotcars)



# Diet

## MAKE SURE YOUR DOG HAS A HEALTHY DIET

Your dog needs a well-balanced diet to stay fit and healthy as well as constant access to fresh, clean drinking water at all times. How much your dog needs to eat will depend on things such as age, how active they are and their general health. If your dog eats more food than they need, they will become overweight and may suffer.

Always ask your vet for advice on what, and how much, to feed your dog. There are a range of different diets available and what is suitable will depend on your individual dog's needs. Meal times should always be supervised and always make sure plenty of clean, fresh drinking water is available.

Whatever kind of food you choose, always read the manufacturer's instructions. Once you've found a balanced diet which suits your dog, then stick to it. Changing diets suddenly can lead to upset stomachs.



Becky Murray, Andrew Forsyth, Joe Murphy, Philip Toscano/RSPCA Photolibrary



Unless advised otherwise by your vet, feed your dog at least twice a day.

Ask your vet for advice if you need to change your dog's diet for any reason (such as their age, activity levels or health problems). If your dog's eating or drinking habits change, talk to your vet as they could be ill.

Be aware that most human meals don't provide dogs with the nutrition they need and some foods, such as chocolate, onions, grapes and raisins can be poisonous to dogs (see page 17 for further details).

### Weight watch

There are a few simple regular checks you can make yourself to help check that your dog is a healthy weight.

- Make sure you can see and feel the outline of your dog's ribs without excess fat covering.
- You should be able to see and feel your dog's waist and it should be clearly visible when viewed from above.
- Your dog's belly should be tucked up when viewed from the side.

If you are in any doubt about your dog's weight, always talk to your vet.

■ **For further information about pet obesity visit the RSPCA website at: [www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/general/obesity](http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/general/obesity)**



# Behaviour

## MAKE SURE YOUR DOG IS ABLE TO BEHAVE NORMALLY

Dogs need regular exercise and plenty of opportunities to walk, sniff and play outdoors and to learn new skills through training. They are playful and inquisitive animals and enjoy having fun with toys, people and other dogs.



Choose a type and size of dog that is suited to you, everyone living in your house, your home and your lifestyle. Exercise your dog regularly to keep them fit, active and stimulated – and make sure they have enough to do so that they don't become distressed or bored.

The way a dog behaves is influenced by factors such as their age, environment, personality and past experiences – frightening experiences and punishment can lead to behaviour problems and suffering. You should make sure your dog has constant access to a safe haven where they can escape if they feel afraid.

If your dog's behaviour changes, it could mean they are distressed, bored, ill or injured so always talk to your vet if you are concerned and they can refer you to a clinical animal behaviourist if necessary.

- For further information on clinical animal behaviourists, see page 18.



## BACK TO BASICS

Train your dog from an early age using rewards. Never shout at or punish them as they are very unlikely to understand and may become nervous or scared of you. Always try to be calm and consistent in the way you, your family and friends react to your dog. Finding the right training class which uses kind, reward based methods is important to make sure your dog is going to be happy. If your dog often shows fear or signs of stress (such as excessive panting, licking lips, hiding, cowering, aggression) or exhibits any other behaviour problems, talk to your vet who can rule out any health problems and refer you to a clinical animal behaviourist if necessary.

## Keeping fit

How much exercise, and the type of exercise your dog needs will vary depending on factors like their age and health, but all dogs need regular exercise to keep them fit, active and stimulated. Give your dog the opportunity to run every day, unless your vet recommends otherwise.

It is important to teach your dog how to walk on a lead to protect them from traffic. Dog faeces can be a health hazard so you must always pick up and dispose of your dog's poo! Even in the countryside, no matter how placid your dog is, use a lead when walking near livestock which can often be the target of attacks by dogs. But try to find a safe area where you can let your dog off the lead for a good run around.

## Barking

Dogs may bark for a variety of reasons such as during play, as a greeting or for attention. But prolonged periods of barking may be because your dog is unhappy, so it's vital to find out why this is happening. If your dog barks a lot when left alone, they may be having difficulty coping. It's important to talk to your vet who may suggest referral to a clinical animal behaviourist. They can diagnose the root cause of the behaviour problem and develop a treatment programme, based on kind, reward based methods, specifically for you and your dog.

- Find out about behaviour problems and how to find a good trainer at: [www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/training/trainer](http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/training/trainer)

Joe Murphy, Alison Stollwood/RSPCA Photolibrary



## AGGRESSION

Dogs are aggressive in response to unfolding events and it's invariably because they think that they are under some form of threat. For example, the threat could be to their personal safety, to take away something (or someone) they value highly. Aggression, especially when there is no history of it, can be a sign that your dog is in pain or suffering from an undiagnosed medical condition. Always ask your vet for advice.

Dogs communicate mainly through body language. They have a wide range of non-aggressive signals and postures that they exhibit when they want us to stop doing whatever it is that they don't like. These signals include gestures that show they are uncomfortable, like yawning, lip licking, averting their gaze, turning their head away, dropping ears, crouching, low wagging or tucking their tail under and rolling over on their back. If these signals are ignored the dog may have no choice but to use more obvious aggressive signals.



### If your dog shows signs of aggression

Firstly, stop whatever it is you are doing. Aggression is your dog's way of asking you to stop. Then move away from your dog. Do not talk to them or tell them off as this can escalate the situation, instead give space, move away and stay calm. When the aggression stops, think about what caused it and avoid doing the same thing again. Dogs should never be punished for showing aggressive behaviour as this is likely to make them more fearful.

If your dog ever shows fearful or aggressive behaviour, you really should get some professional advice. Talk to your vet who will be able to refer you to a clinical animal behaviourist (see page 18).

■ **Take a look at our factsheet on *Canine aggression* including information on where to go for help and advice at: [www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/behaviour/aggression](http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/behaviour/aggression)**



# Company

## MAKE SURE YOUR DOG HAS APPROPRIATE COMPANY

Dogs are highly sociable animals so they need and enjoy company. If they have positive early life experiences, they learn to see people as friends and companions. Your dog will become lonely, bored and distressed if they are left without company and have nothing to do for long periods of time.

### Good company

If your dog has pleasant experiences playing with a wide variety of other dogs early in their life, it's more likely they will become more sociable as an adult.

Providing they are friendly towards other dogs, allow interaction with them on a regular basis. If your dog is fearful of, or aggressive towards other dogs, avoid the situations that lead to this behaviour, and seek advice from a vet or clinical animal behaviourist (see page 18). Never leave your dog unsupervised with another

animal or person who may deliberately or accidentally harm or frighten them and when you are away, make sure your dog is properly cared for by a responsible person.

If you have more than one dog, if possible, house them together if they are friendly towards each other, but make sure they have enough space and can get away from one another if they want to, and there are plenty of toys, water bowls, and beds for each of them.

Chris Brignell, Angela Hampton, Andrew Forsyth/RSPCA Photolibrary, Victoria Rak/Istock



## Meeting new people

For lots of dogs, meeting new people and spending time with them is a great source of interaction and fun. Of course, all dogs are different and some may be a little worried or nervous around new people.

Watching your dog closely can help you understand how they are feeling. If your dog seems to be scared or worried, it is important not to force them to say hello as this can worry them even more.

Allow them to move away from the situation or try to distract your dog with something fun and positive such as their favourite toy.

If your dog is obviously very worried or frightened then guide them away or call them in an upbeat positive manner and reward with a treat or praise when they return to you.

■ **To find out more about learning to read your dog's behavioural signs, go to:**  
[www.rspca.org.uk/dogs/behaviour](http://www.rspca.org.uk/dogs/behaviour)



## Learning to be left alone

One of the most effective ways of preventing your dog from becoming anxious when they are left alone is to teach them right from the start that being alone is enjoyable! To do this you need to very gradually increase the time that you leave your dog alone so that it is never frightening and always associated with something pleasant.

Try to always feed and exercise your dog before leaving them and give them a chance to go to the toilet. Take them for a walk, returning home half an hour before you are due to leave and give them something to entertain them while you are away – for example a 'special' toy or treat that they really love such as a 'Kong' stuffed with food.

The speed that you progress will depend on your dog's reaction. Never leave your dog so long that they start to become distressed. When you first become a dog owner, if you have to go out and leave them for long periods of time, arrange for friends or family to help out for a while.

## Avoid all punishment

If your dog engages in unwanted behaviour while you are out, such as destructiveness or toileting, it is vital that you don't react badly when you come home. Your dog will link any punishment with your return rather than the destruction, barking or toileting carried out some time previously. They will then become anxious about what you will do when you return the next time they are left alone and, as a result, will be more likely to chew or lose toilet control, making the problem even worse!

Dogs who have been told off in the past when their owners return frequently make themselves as small as possible, putting their ears back and their tail between their legs. Unfortunately owners often think that the dogs look guilty and punish them because they "know they have done wrong". Even if you take your dog to the scene of the crime, they will not be able to associate your anger with their behaviour hours earlier – your dog will simply become more anxious and you will damage the bond between you.

Although it's not easy, if you do find a mess when you come home, it is essential that you never physically punish or shout at your dog. Try to even avoid letting them see that you are annoyed – let them outside before cleaning up.

■ **Find out more about how to build up each stage in the process at:**  
[www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/training/leftalone](http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/training/leftalone)





# Health & welfare

MAKE SURE YOUR DOG IS PROTECTED FROM PAIN, SUFFERING, INJURY AND DISEASE

Dogs can suffer from a range of infectious diseases and other illnesses but individual dogs show pain and suffering in different ways.

A change in the way a dog behaves can be an early sign that they are ill or in pain. Dogs who are insecure or stressed can also become unwell as a result. Never let the thought of having to pay for veterinary treatment stop you from making sure your dog has the best of care.

Before deciding to get a dog, make sure you find out what health and behaviour

problems they have, or may be prone to, for instance as a result of their breed, how they have been bred, and how they have been socialised and cared for. Always check with a vet if you are unsure.

■ **For useful advice on how to get a happy, healthy puppy, check out:** [www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/puppy](http://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/dogs/puppy)



Make sure your dog is microchipped. Any dog over the age of eight weeks is now legally required to be microchipped and registered on an approved database. It's also a legal requirement to keep your contact details up to date.

Microchipping your dog gives you the best chance of being reunited if they go missing.

By law, a dog in a public place must wear a collar with their owner's name and address either on the collar or on an attached tag.

Also think about taking out pet insurance – so that you'll be covered for unexpected vets' bills in the future.

Philip Toscano, Angela Hampton, Joe Murphy/RSPCA Photolibrary

## POISONING

It's every responsible owner's nightmare if their pet is poisoned. Make sure you're prepared for such an emergency. Preventing your dog from coming into contact with poisonous substances and treating any accidental poisonings quickly and appropriately is an important part of responsible pet ownership.

Never 'watch and wait' in any case of suspected poisoning. If you suspect your pet has been poisoned, act fast and contact your vet for advice immediately.

Signs of poisoning include vomiting, being unsteady on their feet, diarrhoea, dehydration, hyperactivity, high temperature and blood pressure, abnormal heart rhythm and tremors.

■ **Read our advice on what to do if you think your dog has been poisoned and how to prevent poisonings at:** [www.rspca.org.uk/poisoning](http://www.rspca.org.uk/poisoning)

You can also check out our information on some of the most common poisons that dog owners should be aware of. These include chocolate, anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen, grapes, raisins, sultanas, currants, slug/snail baits and rodent poisons.



## Health checklist

- **Check your dog for signs of injury or illness every day, and make sure someone else does this if you are away.** If you suspect that your dog is in pain, ill or injured, ask your vet for advice immediately.
- **Take your dog for a routine health check with your vet at least once a year.** It's a good chance to ask for advice about things you can do to protect your dog's health, including essential vaccinations and treatments to control parasites (e.g. fleas and worms).  
Dogs should be routinely vaccinated against canine parvovirus, canine distemper virus, leptospirosis and infectious canine hepatitis.
- **Think about getting your dog neutered.** Neutering can help reduce the huge number of unwanted pets, prevent illnesses and some unwanted behaviours.  
If you do decide to breed, talk to your vet to make sure the dogs' health and personalities are suitable for breeding and make sure you are able to look after both the mother and puppies (including finding them good homes).
- **Only use medicines that have been prescribed for your individual dog.**
- **Make sure your dog's coat is kept in good condition by grooming them regularly.** If you're not sure how to groom your dog's coat properly, talk to a pet care specialist.

■ For detailed information go to: [www.rspca.org.uk/dogs/healthandwelfare](http://www.rspca.org.uk/dogs/healthandwelfare)

## How to find a behaviour expert

Dogs can develop a range of behaviour problems, such as aggression, destructiveness, inappropriate toileting, nervousness and phobias.

If your dog develops a behaviour problem, it's important to get them checked by your vet first, in order to rule out any illness or injury that could be causing the problem. Your vet can then refer you to a clinical animal behaviourist.

Behaviour experts will work to identify the cause of the behaviour problem and then develop structured treatment plans that are suitable for you, your dog and your circumstances.

■ Visit: [www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist](http://www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist)



Grass: Dimitrije Janaskovic/Istock

## FIND OUT MORE...

Dogs are amazing animals with complex needs that must be met if they are to be kept healthy and happy.

There's loads more to learn about dogs on the RSPCA website – from our fun facts to detailed advice sheets on various aspects of dog care.

So make sure you visit:  
[www.rspca.org.uk/dogs](http://www.rspca.org.uk/dogs)

Keeping your  
dogs healthy  
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