



Rhodes  
and his dog  
Sydney.

PHOTO:  
VALERIE SHORE

## Gaming? Dog walking? Whatever it takes to get off the couch

BY PATTY PITTS

Bikes, video games, dogs—UVic behavioural psychologist Dr. Ryan Rhodes has studied a variety of motivations to get people off the couch and into a more active lifestyle. He and fellow researchers have examined whether owning a dog motivates people to maintain a regular walking schedule and has demonstrated that using computer game bikes to power the gaming process is effective in helping people stick to an exercise regime.

Since regular exercise is a proven factor in

fighting cancer, Rhodes was recently recognized for his work and awarded one of only two 2011 Canadian Cancer Society Senior Scientist Awards worth \$500,000 over five years. The award frees Rhodes from his teaching duties to devote more time to his research.

"I'm very honoured to be given this award and opportunity," says Rhodes, who is director of UVic's Behavioural Medicine Laboratory. "The next series of studies on exercise games, conducted during the tenure of this award, will be focused on evaluating these games in the family home. Prior research has shown positive outcomes in terms of adherence

and fitness benefits, but the studies are lab-based and comprised of young males. There is a convincing link between physical activity and reductions in the prevalence of several cancers. The problem is motivating people to exercise. I want to see if the results I've achieved in the lab hold up in the home where there are far more distractions."

One distraction that Rhodes and his fellow researchers welcome is the family dog.

"Research has shown that walking is a very effective means of achieving physical activity levels

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for optimum health," says Rhodes. "And we know that dog owners walk more than non-dog owners. Our observational snapshot of park use supports earlier work that dogs serve as motivational support for their owners' walking practices through fair and foul weather."

Rhodes and other researchers studied walkers with and without dogs in six area parks. While more people without dogs (73 per cent) visited parks than those with dogs (27 per cent) during the months of fair and poor weather, non-dog walking and vigorous activity levels fell significantly—by 35 per cent and 5 per cent respectively—when the weather turned foul. However, visits to parks by dog owners for walking increased during months of winter

weather by almost 6 per cent.

The researchers want to expand on their research and are looking for adult dog owners who walk their dog(s) less than four times a week for a minimum of 30 minutes at a brisk pace and would like to be more active. Participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire and wear a pedometer for seven days at the start, middle and end of the three-month period.

Honorariums of a \$25 gift card will be given to participants at the mid and end points of study. Contact Holly Murray at 250-472-5488 or [bml@uvic.ca](mailto:bml@uvic.ca) if you are interested in participating.

Results of the study will be published in the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*.