

The One-Line Baseline

How to know what normal looks like for your dog, so the quiet changes don't sneak past you

A free guide from Lila at Happy Dog

First, what this is

This is a short, practical guide to paying attention. Not a diagnosis tool. A habit.

Dogs are pretty good at telling us how they're doing, if we know what to notice. Your dog can't say "my hip has felt off since Tuesday." But they will show you, usually in small ways, usually well before it gets loud.

The trouble is that "normal" is easy to feel and hard to remember. Ask most of us how our dog's appetite was three weeks ago and we'll guess. This guide fixes that with something that takes about ten seconds a day.

1. Normal means your dog's normal

Charts and breed averages have their place. But the most useful comparison for your dog is your dog, last month.

A dog who has always been a slow, thoughtful eater is not a worry. A dog who used to inhale breakfast and now walks away from half of it is worth noticing, even though half a bowl is perfectly normal for plenty of other dogs.

So the goal is not to measure your dog against anyone. The goal is to know your dog well enough that a change stands out.

2. The one line

Once a day, at roughly the same time, write one line. A notes app, a paper calendar on the fridge, an email to yourself. Wherever you will actually do it.

Cover five things, a word or two each:

- **Energy:** how they greeted you, how the walk went
- **Appetite:** ate fast, ate slow, left some
- **Poop:** boring, soft, other
- **Movement:** how the first steps looked after a rest
- **Mood:** themselves, quiet, clingy, restless

A real line looks like this:

Monday. Bouncy at the door. Ate everything fast. Boring poop. Slow first minute after nap, fine after. Herself.

That's it. You are not writing a report. You are leaving a trail of breadcrumbs for your future self.

When something in your dog's world changes, add it in brackets at the end: (*new food started*), (*guests all weekend*), (*long hike*). That bit of context can turn a mystery into a simple answer later.

Once a month, add a hands-on check. When your dog is relaxed, run your hands slowly from nose to tail, the way you'd pet them anyway. Behind the ears, along the ribs, down each leg, between the toes. Notice lumps, warm spots, flinches, and thin or matted patches. Write down where anything is and roughly how big.

Lift a lip and look at teeth and gums, if your dog agrees to it. If they don't, try another day with a treat. A check your dog hates isn't worth forcing. Your dog has a say.

While they're sound asleep, count their breaths for 30 seconds and write the number down. You don't need to know what the number "should" be. You're recording what it is for your dog, so you'll know if it ever changes.

3. Small things worth watching

These aren't symptoms. They're the low-voice signals that something has shifted. Any one of them, once, is usually just a Tuesday. The same one, again and again, is worth a line.

Movement - First steps after a nap that look stiffer than they used to - A pause before the stairs, the couch, or the car - Sitting slightly crooked, or lying down in stages - Turning back earlier on a walk you've done a hundred times

Digestion - Poop that has gone from boring to unpredictable - More gas, gurgling, or grass-eating than usual - Eating slower, or more urgently, than they used to - Drinking noticeably more or less water

Skin and coat - Licking or chewing one spot, especially at the same time of day - Head shaking or scratching at the ears - A new smell, flakes, or a coat that has lost its shine

Mouth - Breath that has changed, not just "dog breath" - Chewing on one side, dropping food, or pawing at the mouth - Turning down hard treats they used to love

Energy, mood, and behavior - A different greeting at the door - Sleeping in a new spot, or for more hours than before - Less interest in a favorite toy or game - New clinginess, hiding, startling, or snapping

You don't need to watch all of these. Your daily line will catch most of them on its own. This list is here for when something nags at you and you want words for it.

4. Watch one thing for a week

When something keeps catching your eye, don't try to watch everything. Pick one thing and give it a week of honest attention.

Step 1: Name it. One sentence. "She's licking her front left paw."

Step 2: Turn it into a question you can answer in ten seconds. "Did she lick the paw today? When, and for about how long?" Worry is vague. A good question names one moment and one answer you can write down.

Step 3: Ask it at the same time every day. Same time means you're comparing like with like. For movement, the first steps after a long rest usually tell you the most.

Step 4: Note the context. Food, treats, weather, a long walk, a new person in the house, a change in schedule. Small changes often have small causes, and context is how you find them. (Two things happening together is a clue, not proof.)

Step 5: Change one thing at most. If something new lines up with when this started, and you can reasonably undo it, undo that one thing. Not three. Change three things at once and you'll never know which one mattered. And if the change is food, your dog gets a vote: if she tells you she hates the new food, believe her.

Step 6: Take a short video. If you can see it, film 15 seconds of it on day 1 and day 7. A limp, a cough, a strange sit. Dogs are famous for behaving perfectly the moment anyone else is watching. A video shows what you saw at home.

Step 7: Read the week back on day 7. You'll usually land in one of three places:

- **Faded.** It showed up and went away. Note it and keep your daily line going.
- **Steady.** It's there, it isn't changing, and your dog otherwise seems like your dog. Keep the one change you made (if any), and watch another week.
- **Growing.** It's happening more, lasting longer, or new things have joined it. More watching won't tell you more. Go to section 5.

5. The red line, and bringing someone in

Some things don't get a week. If you see any of these, call your vet or an emergency clinic now:

- Trouble breathing, or gums that look pale, gray, or blue
- Collapse, a seizure, or sudden weakness or wobbling
- A swollen, tight belly, especially with retching that brings nothing up
- Repeated vomiting or diarrhea, or any with blood in it
- Straining to pee with little or nothing coming out
- Refusing food or water for a day
- Obvious pain: crying out, refusing to put weight on a leg, hunching, not wanting to be touched
- Eating something you suspect could be toxic

And the one people talk themselves out of: **your gut saying something is wrong.** You live with this dog. If they don't feel like your dog, that counts. Calling and being told it's nothing is a good outcome, not an embarrassing one.

Pick the right person for the problem. Pain, illness, and anything getting worse belong with your vet. Behavior is different. New fear, guarding, or aggression toward people or

other dogs may need someone who truly understands behavior and works without force, fear, or pain. Your regular vet may not be the right person for that particular problem. Ask how they work before you hand over your dog.

Bring one page. Appointments go fast, and most of us remember the important question in the parking lot. Write down:

1. What changed, in one sentence
2. When you first noticed it
3. How often it happens, and at what time of day
4. Better, worse, or the same since it started
5. Anything that changed around then: food, treats, routine, travel, household
6. Eating, drinking, peeing, pooping: any changes
7. Your video
8. Your top three questions, most important first

Good questions to have ready:

- What would make you want to see us sooner?
- What should I watch for at home, and for how long?
- When should we check again if nothing changes?
- If there are a few ways to approach this, what are the options and what do they cost?

Afterward, before you start the car, write down what they said: what they think, what to watch, when to come back. Then add it to your daily lines so you have something to measure against.

And tell me what they found. Bringing someone in doesn't end the conversation. It just means we're not guessing anymore.

One last thing

Our dogs didn't ask to be domesticated. We did that. So we owe them something: respect for who they are, attention to what matters to them, and leadership without fear or force. The good news is that attention is cheap. Ten seconds a day.

Start tonight. One line.

Lila

The One-Line Baseline is a free guide from Happy Dog (makeyourdoghappy.com). It's about observation, not diagnosis.

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