

How Long Is Too Long to Crate a Dog?

Dogs should not be forced to spend all day in a crate.

By September Morn

Q. My 2½-year-old dog, Zoe, is a lovable, friendly, fun-loving part of our family. She is also the first pet I've ever had. We have cratetrained her since she was 7 weeks old. When she first came to live with us, I was not working outside the home and we only crated her when we all went out. I now work full time and am gone for eight hours a day. I feel bad about leaving her in her crate for so long. I walk her and she gets exercise with our 9-year-old son, but I wonder if she would be OK uncrated when we are gone, so she could walk around the house. She hates being closed up in another room, so I don't want to confine her like that. We don't crate her at night -- she usually sleeps in our son's room, on our bedroom floor, or in her open crate. I'm also afraid that if we don't crate her when we're gone, if we ever need to crate her if she's sick or needs surgery, she won't want to get in it.

A. You're right to be concerned about crating Zoe for eight to 10 hours every day. That's not really good for dogs, as they need to move around and change positions more than a crate allows. Crating is mostly to protect the dog and the household furnishings through the potty training and teething stages of puppyhood and adolescence. Zoe is a full adult now, and if she doesn't tend to chew your belongings or have potty accidents when you're not watching, there's really no need to crate her all day. If she doesn't behave irresponsibly while you're asleep at night, she should be ready to graduate from her crate in the daytime, too.

Try it out on a weekend, when you're not gone all day. Leave Zoe alone, loose in the house, for an hour. If she doesn't cause any damage or become overly anxious during that time, try it again for two hours later that day. If she can be left alone that long without misbehaving, she can probably handle your workday schedule without being crated. Leave the crate where it is for a few months, and if she continues to bed down in it for naps or nighttime, you could keep it available permanently, with the door open. That way, if there's ever a reason to temporarily confine her, the crate will be convenient and she's already comfortable in it.

Since Zoe has had her whole life to get used to being crated, and even goes into it on her own sometimes, she shouldn't have any problem being crated for medical reasons.