

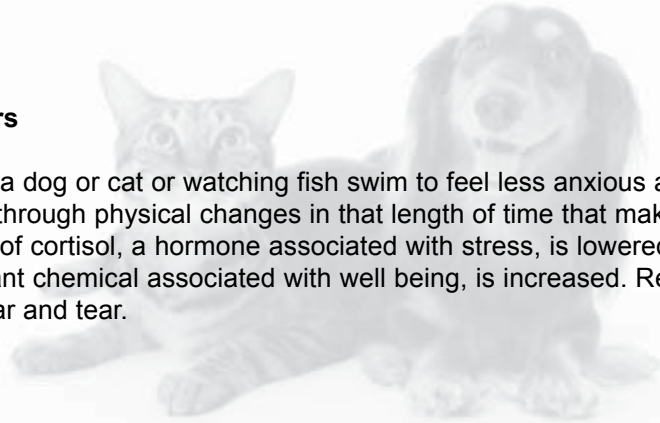


How Pets Can Improve Human Health

from www.medicinenet.com

Pets Are Natural Mood Enhancers

It only takes 15 to 30 minutes with a dog or cat or watching fish swim to feel less anxious and less stressed. Your body actually goes through physical changes in that length of time that make a difference in your mood. The level of cortisol, a hormone associated with stress, is lowered. And the production of serotonin, an important chemical associated with well being, is increased. Reducing stress saves your body a lot of wear and tear.



Keep Blood Pressure in Check

You still have to watch your weight and exercise. But having a pet can help you manage your blood pressure. In one study of 240 married couples, pet owners had lower blood pressure and lower heart rates during rest than people who did not own a pet. That held true whether they were at rest or undergoing stress tests. And another study showed that children with hypertension actually lowered their blood pressure while petting their dog.

Help for Lowering Cholesterol

To manage cholesterol, doctors still recommend that you follow guidelines regarding diet, exercise, and medication. But owning a pet has the potential of making it easier to avoid the dangers of cholesterol. Researchers have noted lower levels of cholesterol and triglycerides in people who own pets compared to people who don't. However, this could be attributed to lifestyle factors of pet owners.



Cats and Dogs Good for the Heart

Research has shown the long-term benefits of owning a cat include protection for your heart. Over the 20 years of one study, people who never owned a cat were 40% more likely to die of a heart attack than those who had. Another study showed that dog owners had a significantly better survival rate one year after a heart attack. Overall, pet owners have a lower risk of dying from any cardiac disease, including heart failure.

Pet an Animal and Fight Depression

Therapists have been known to prescribe a pet as a way of dealing with and recovering from depression. No one loves you more unconditionally than your pet. And a pet will listen to you talk for as long as you want to talk. Petting a cat or dog has a calming effect. And taking care of a pet — walking with it, grooming it, playing with it — takes you out of yourself and helps you feel better about the way you spend your time.

Better Physical Fitness

People who own dogs tend to be more physically active and less obese than people who don't. Taking your dog for a daily 30-minute walk will keep you moving and ensure that you meet the minimum recommendations for healthy physical activity. Two 15-minute walks, one in the morning and one in the evening, will do the same thing. And after that, just playing fetch in the back yard with your dog will earn you healthful dividends.

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Make Your Pet an Exercise Buddy

If you exercise with your pet, you'll both benefit. Shine a flashlight on the wall or wave a string while you do a step aerobics routine. Your cat will get a healthy workout chasing the light, and you'll be thoroughly entertained. Some people like to use their cat rather than dumbbells when doing weight training. And nationwide, there are yoga classes for people and their dogs, called doga. Call your local gym or ask your vet if there are similar programs in your area.

Fewer Strokes Among Cat Owners

Researchers aren't sure why. But cat owners have fewer strokes than people who don't own cats. It's partly due to the effects owning a pet can have on a person's circulation. But researchers speculate that cats may have a more calming effect on their owners than other animals do. It may also have something to do with the personality of a cat owner. Cats often become the focus of their owner's interest, which diverts them from other stressful worries.

More Interaction, Less Isolation

One key to a healthy mind is staying engaged with others. And pet owners have a tendency to want to talk with other pet owners. A dog is a conversation waiting to happen. People, especially other people with dogs, will stop and talk with you when they see you walking your pet. Visiting a dog park lets you socialize with other owners while your dog socializes with their dogs.

Fewer Allergies, Stronger Immunity

Researchers have noted that when children grow up in a home with a dog or cat they are less likely to develop allergies. The same is true for kids who live on a farm with large animals. In addition, higher levels of certain immune system chemicals indicate a stronger immune system activation, which will help keep them healthy as they get older.

Snack Alarm

For people with diabetes, a sudden drop in the level of blood glucose can be very serious. Some dogs can alert their owner to a dangerous drop before it actually happens. They may be responding to chemical changes in the body that give off a scent. The alarm gives the owner time to eat a snack to avoid the emergency. About one in three dogs living with people with diabetes have this ability. Dogs for Diabetics is training more dogs to help more people.

Working With a Counselor

Some mental health therapists use a dog in therapy. A dog in the office may help someone be more at ease. But that's not all. A remark to or about a dog may reveal what's really on a patient's mind. One therapist tells about a couple in his office who started bickering. The dog, which usually just slept during the session, got up and wanted out. He used that to help the couple see how their fighting affected others, especially their children.



Walking your dog is good for you both.



Partners in Better Cancer Care

Cats and dogs both get cancer, and both benefit from research on human cancer. But more and more the opposite is also true. Humans are benefiting from research on their cancers. Dogs and cats can get the same kinds of cancers humans do. For example, studies of prostate cancer in dogs have led to a better understanding of how it develops in older men. And preventing cancer in pets can lead to new prevention strategies for their human owners.

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Overcoming the Limitations of ADHD

Kids with ADHD can benefit from working with and keeping a pet. Taking charge of the tasks on a pet care schedule helps a child learn to plan and be responsible. Pets need to play, and playing with a pet is an excellent way to release excess energy. That means an easier time falling asleep at bed time. And because the bond between a pet and a child is unconditional love, pets help children with ADHD learn about self-esteem.

Autism: Addressing the Senses

Sensory issues are common among children with autism. Sensory integration activities are designed to help them adjust, for instance, to the way something feels against their skin. Or it may be how they react to certain smells or sounds. Dogs and horses have both sometimes been incorporated into these activities. The children typically find it calming to work with animals. And animals easily hold the attention of children with autism.

Want Stronger Bones? Walk the Dog

Strong bones are your best defense against osteoporosis and painful fractures. Walking your dog helps. It's a weight-bearing exercise that strengthens your bones and the muscles around them. It also lets you spend time in the sun, which provides vitamin D. If you have osteoporosis, be sure you guard against falls. Use a short leash that won't get tangled. And don't walk a dog that is liable to jump on you and make you lose your balance.



Stretching With the Cat

If you have arthritis, you know it's important to stretch. You also know it can be hard to know when you're stretching enough. An article in *Arthritis Today* advises cat owners to take a cue from their cat. Watch how many times she stretches every day, and when she does, you do it too. If you can, get down on the floor and go through the same motions. If you can't get on the floor, sit on a chair and follow along by stretching your upper body.

Managing Arthritis Together

If your dog has arthritis, you can use the effort to manage his to help manage yours. When you make an appointment at the vet, also call and make your own doctor's appointment. Regular exercise is important for both of you, so walk with your dog. Keep your medicine in the same place you keep the dog's. That way you'll see it when you get his. And if you can, coordinate taking your medicines at the same time you give him his medicine.

Relief From RA

People with rheumatoid arthritis derive benefit from movements like walking and throwing a Frisbee with their pet. And pets provide a distraction that can help take your thoughts off of your own condition. But perhaps the best help comes from those dogs or cats that seem to be super sensitive to people who aren't feeling well. Sometimes just their presence can provide a relieving comfort.



Soothing Heat

A Mexican hairless dog called a Xolo is known for generating intense body heat. An organization called Paws for Comfort trains Xolos to be service dogs for people with fibromyalgia and other forms of chronic pain that respond to heat. People get relief just by placing their hurting limbs against the dog's body or lying up next to it. Some dogs have even been trained to ride around wrapped around the neck of a person with chronic neck pain.

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Seizure Dogs

A “seizure dog” is one that has been specially trained to live and work with people who have epilepsy. Some are trained to bark and alert the parents when a child is having a seizure outside or in another room. Some lie next to a person having a seizure to prevent injury (as seen in this demonstration). And some work has been done training dogs to warn before a seizure occurs. This gives the person time to lie down or move away from a dangerous place such as a hot stove.

Staying Independent

Specially trained dogs can perform tasks that let people with Parkinson's disease maintain their independence. They can pick up dropped items or fetch requested ones. They can provide balance support, open and close doors, turn lights on with their paws. They can also sense when someone with Parkinson's is “freezing” and touch the foot to let the person keep walking. Groups like the Delta Society can help you find a good service dog.

A Better Quality of Life

Visits from therapy dogs help patients recovering from devastating illness or an event such as a stroke. Some dogs are trained to understand a range of commands which lets them help people with aphasia (a language disorder common in older adults, particularly those who've had a stroke) feel good when they see the dog understands them. And, petting or scratching a dog can help a patient rebuild strength while recovering from a stroke or other illness. It also creates a feeling of calm.

A Calming Presence

People with AIDS are less likely to be depressed if they own a pet, especially if they're strongly attached. And with an animal in the home, people with Alzheimer's have fewer anxious outbursts. The animal also helps the caregivers feel less burdened. Cats seem to be particularly helpful since they require less care than dogs.

Animal Assisted Therapies

Some studies are being done on bringing specially trained animals into clinical settings, which is happening in more and more hospitals and nursing homes. One of the biggest advantages of letting patients interact with animals in such places appears to be improved mood and reduced anxiety.



Become a Citizen.

www.K9Nation.org