

Animals and Your Health: The Benefits of Pet Ownership

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En Español (Spanish Version)



You've had a horrible day. Your car was hit in the parking lot, you missed a project deadline, and you're starving. You juggle your briefcase and keys, open the front door, and are greeted by a lop-sided grin and wagging tail. Laughing, you reach down and playfully tussle your Labrador's head—all the worries melting away as you romp on the living room carpet. Ah, the joys of pets.

There is no doubt that the companionship and love a pet can offer is a valuable thing. But maybe the benefits of pets go beyond this emotional bond. A growing body of evidence suggests that those who keep pets are likely to benefit from a variety of improvements in health. In this article, we explore how animals can be good for both your mental and physical health.

What the Studies Show

A 1999 study in the *Journal of the American Geriatric Society* looked at nearly 1,000 men and women (average age: 73 years) and found that owning a cat or dog helped maintain or even slightly enhance their Activities of Daily Living (ADL) score. This scale included questions about being able to do activities like walking several blocks, getting in and out of bed, preparing meals, bathing and dressing, and preparing food. Though this study found no direct link between psychological well-being and pet ownership, people in this survey who owned pets and had lower social support in a crisis situation were less likely to experience a decline in psychological well-being when compared to those with lower social support who did not have pets.

Researchers have observed that older adults who own pets are less likely to use physician services unnecessarily. Other research has suggested that owning a dog can reduce the impact of stresses encountered in day-to-day life. In addition, studies have found that pets in the workplace are perceived to relieve employee stress, make the environment friendlier, provide a pleasant diversion from work, and provide companionship. These benefits may even be passed on to customers that encounter pets in businesses, giving a favorable impression of a company and fostering social interaction.

The Heart Health Benefits of Pets

Studies have shown that those who own pets may have significantly lower systolic blood pressure, triglyceride values, and cholesterol levels than those who do not own pets—even after accounting for additional exercise and other differences that might be present.

A study published in the *American Journal of Cardiology* found that male dog owners were significantly less likely to die within one year after a heart attack than those who did not own a dog. These findings were significant, though the ability to generalize these findings to the total US population was limited by the small sample size (369 men), the measurement techniques that were used, and the fact that these men had cardiovascular disease. These results, however, may still be useful in prompting further exploration into what it is about pet ownership that provides these health benefits.

Other researchers have found that the presence of a pet is associated with a decreased cardiovascular reactivity to stressors and that cardiovascular risk factors were greater among those who did not own a pet than those who did.

Why We Benefit From the Company of Animals

There are several benefits to having a pet:

- Companionship and pleasurable activity
- Facilitate exercise, play, and laughter
- Have something to care for and a source of consistency
- Allow feeling of security
- Are a comfort to touch and a pleasure to watch
- Provide a link with reality to enhance emotional stability
- Become a receptive partner in a relationship of mutual trust that promotes self-awareness
- Provide nonjudgmental acceptance and love
- Are an outlet for one's ancient primate grooming urges
- Improved sense of well-being

Is a Pet Right For You?

Does this mean you should run to the nearest pet store and buy a cat, bird, or fish? Though this preliminary research suggests that pet ownership may be beneficial to your health, you need to make sure that the pet you choose fits in with your lifestyle, habits, experience, and expectations. Because pets are completely dependent on you for everything, it's important to make sure that you're willing to commit to the responsibilities they entail. If you've never had a pet before, starting out with a fish or hamster might be a better idea than jumping right into dog or cat ownership. A number of resources can help you see if owning a pet is right for you.

Other Articles on Animals and Your Health:

- [Animals and Your Health: Dogs as Disease Detectors](#)
- [Animals and Your Health: Pet-Facilitated Therapy](#)
- [Animals and Your Health: Service Animals](#)
- [Animals and Your Health: Dangers of Exotic Pets](#)

RESOURCES:

American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA)

<http://www.asPCA.org>

American Veterinary Medical Association

<http://www.avma.org>

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