The Health and Mood-Boosting Benefits of Pets

Pets come with some powerful health benefits. Here’s how caring for a dog, cat, or other animal can help relieve depression and anxiety, lower stress, and improve your heart health.

The benefits of pets

Most pet owners are clear about the immediate joys that come with sharing their lives with companion animals. However, many of us remain unaware of the physical and mental health
benefits that can also accompany the pleasure of snuggling up to a furry friend. It’s only recently that studies have begun to scientifically explore the benefits of the human-animal bond.

Pets have evolved to become acutely attuned to humans and our behavior and emotions. Dogs, for example, are able to understand many of the words we use, but they’re even better at interpreting our tone of voice, body language, and gestures. And like any good human friend, a loyal dog will look into your eyes to gauge your emotional state and try to understand what you’re thinking and feeling (and to work out when the next walk or treat might be coming, of course).

Pets, especially dogs and cats, can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, ease loneliness, encourage exercise and playfulness, and even improve your cardiovascular health. Caring for an animal can help children grow up more secure and active. Pets also provide valuable companionship for older adults. Perhaps most importantly, though, a pet can add real joy and unconditional love to your life.

Any pet can improve your health

While it’s true that people with pets often experience greater health benefits than those without, a pet doesn’t necessarily have to be a dog or a cat. A rabbit could be ideal if you’re allergic to other animals or have limited space but still want a furry friend to snuggle with. Birds can encourage social interaction and help keep your mind sharp if you’re an older adult. Snakes, lizards, and other reptiles can make for exotic companions. Even watching fish in an aquarium can help reduce muscle tension and lower your pulse rate.

Studies have shown that:

- Pet owners are less likely to suffer from depression than those without pets.
- People with pets have lower blood pressure in stressful situations than those without pets. One study even found that when people with borderline hypertension adopted dogs from a shelter, their blood pressure declined significantly within five months.
- Playing with a dog, cat, or other pet can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine, which calm and relax.
- Pet owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels (indicators of heart disease) than those without pets.
- Heart attack patients with pets survive longer than those without.
- Pet owners over age 65 make 30 percent fewer visits to their doctors than those without pets.
One of the reasons for these therapeutic effects is that pets fulfill the basic human need for touch. Even hardened criminals in prison show long-term changes in their behavior after interacting with pets, many of them experiencing mutual affection for the first time. Stroking, hugging, or otherwise touching a loving animal can rapidly calm and soothe you when you’re stressed or anxious. The companionship of a pet can also ease loneliness, and most dogs are a great stimulus for healthy exercise, which can substantially boost your mood and ease depression.

How pets can help you make healthy lifestyle changes

Adopting healthy lifestyle changes plays an important role in easing symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, bipolar disorder, and PTSD. Caring for a pet can help you make healthy lifestyle changes by:

**Increasing exercise.** Taking a dog for a walk, hike, or run are fun and rewarding ways to fit healthy daily exercise into your schedule. Studies have shown that dog owners are far more likely to meet their daily exercise requirements—and exercising every day is great for the animal as well. It will deepen the connection between you, eradicate most behavior problems in dogs, and keep your pet fit and healthy.

**Providing companionship.** Companionship can help prevent illness and even add years to your life, while isolation and loneliness can trigger symptoms of depression. Caring for an animal can help make you feel needed and wanted, and take the focus away from your problems, especially if you live alone. Most dog and cat owners talk to their pets, some even use them to work through their troubles. And nothing beats loneliness like coming home to a wagging tail or purring cat.

**Helping you meet new people.** Pets can be a great social lubricant for their owners, helping you start and maintain new friendships. Dog owners frequently stop and talk to each other on walks, hikes, or in a dog park. Pet owners also meet new people in pet stores, clubs, and training classes.

**Reducing anxiety.** The companionship of an animal can offer comfort, help ease anxiety, and build self-confidence for people anxious about going out into the world. Because pets tend to live in the moment—they don’t worry about what happened yesterday or what might happen tomorrow—they can help you become more mindful and appreciate the joy of the present.

**Adding structure and routine to your day.** Many pets, especially dogs, require a regular
feeding and exercise schedule. Having a consistent routine keeps an animal balanced and calm—and it can work for you, too. No matter your mood—depressed, anxious, or stressed—one plaintive look from your pet and you’ll have to get out of bed to feed, exercise, and care for them.

[Read: Coping with Depression]

Providing sensory stress relief. Touch and movement are two healthy ways to quickly manage stress. Stroking a dog, cat, or other animal can lower blood pressure and help you quickly feel calmer and less stressed.

Get a dog, lose weight

A number of studies have linked owning a dog to losing weight:

- A year-long study at the Wellness Institute at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Chicago found that walking an overweight dog helped both the animals and their owners shed unwanted pounds. Researchers found that the dogs provided support in similar ways to a human exercise buddy, but with greater consistency and without any negative influence.
- Another study by the Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction found that public housing residents who walked therapy dogs for up to 20 minutes five days a week lost an average of 14.4 pounds in a year, without changing their diets.
- A third study, conducted by dog food manufacturer Mars Petcare, found that people with a dog walked 30 minutes more per week than they did before owning a dog.

The benefits of pets for older adults

As well as providing vital companionship, owning a pet can play an important role in healthy aging by helping you to:

Find meaning and joy in life. As you age, you’ll lose things that previously occupied your time and gave your life purpose. You may retire from your career or your children may move far away. Caring for a pet can bring pleasure and help boost your morale, optimism, and sense of self-worth. Choosing to adopt a pet from a shelter, especially an older pet, can add to your sense of fulfillment, knowing that you’ve provided a home to a pet that may otherwise have been euthanized.
Stay connected. Maintaining a social network isn’t always easy as you grow older. Retirement, illness, death, and relocation can take away close friends and family members. And making new friends can get harder. Pets, especially dogs, are a great way for older adults to spark up conversations and meet new people.

Boost your vitality. You can overcome many of the physical challenges associated with aging by taking good care of yourself. Dogs, cats, and other pets encourage playfulness, laughter, and exercise, which can help boost your immune system and increase your energy.

How pets help adults with Alzheimer’s disease or dementia

As part of the disease, Alzheimer’s patients may exhibit a variety of behavioral problems, many related to an inability to deal with stress.

- Research at the University of California at Davis concluded that Alzheimer’s patients suffer less stress and have fewer anxious outbursts if there is a dog or cat in the home.
- Pets can provide a source of positive, nonverbal communication. The playful interaction and gentle touch from a well-trained, docile animal can help soothe an Alzheimer’s patient and decrease aggressive behavior—as can simply being exposed to bright aquariums or fish tanks.
- In many cases a patient’s problem behavior is a reaction to the stressed response of the primary caretaker. Pets can help ease the stress of caregivers. Cats or caged animals may be more suitable than dogs, which generally require more care and can add to the burden of someone who’s already looking after an Alzheimer’s patient.

The benefits of pets for children

Not only do children who grow up with pets have less risk of allergies and asthma, many also learn responsibility, compassion, and empathy from having a dog or cat.

- Unlike parents or teachers, pets are never critical and don’t give orders. They are always loving and their mere presence at home can help provide a sense of security in children. Having an ever-present pet can help ease separation anxiety in children when mom and dad aren’t around.
Having the love and companionship of a pet can make a child feel important and help them develop a positive self-image.

- Kids who are emotionally attached to their pets are better able to build relationships with other people.
- Studies have also shown that pets can help calm hyperactive or overly aggressive kids. Of course, both the animal and the child need to be trained to behave appropriately with each other.
- A pet can help develop a young and expanding mind by teaching a child empathy and understanding. Kids can talk with their pet without a fear of rejection, which enables them to build their confidence, and even their vocabulary.
- Getting even a small, caged pet, such as a guinea pig or hamster, is a great way to teach a child responsibility.

Like adults, children can benefit from playing with a pet. It can be a source of calmness and relaxation, as well as a source of stimulation for the brain and body. Playing with a pet can even be a doorway to learning for a child. It can stimulate a child’s imagination and curiosity. The rewards of training a dog to perform a new trick, for example, can teach kids the importance of perseverance. Caring for a furry friend can also offer another benefit to a child: immense joy.

**Children with learning disorders and other challenges**

Some children with autism or other learning difficulties are better able to interact with pets than people. Autistic children often rely on nonverbal cues to communicate, just as animals do. And learning to first connect with a pet may even help an autistic child in their interactions with people.

- Pets can help children with learning disabilities learn how to regulate stress and calm themselves, making them better equipped to overcome the challenges of their disorder.
- Playing and exercising with a dog or cat can help a child with learning disorders stay alert and attentive throughout the day. It can also be a great antidote to stress and frustration caused by the learning disability.

**Owning a pet is a major commitment**

Despite all the benefits, it’s important to remember that a pet is not a miracle cure for
mental health issues. Owning a pet is beneficial and comforting only for those who love and appreciate domestic animals and have the time and money to keep a pet happy and healthy. If you’re simply not an “animal person,” pet ownership is not going to provide you with any health benefits or improve your life.

Even if you love animals, it’s important to understand everything that caring for a pet entails. Owning a pet is a major commitment that will last through the animal’s lifetime, perhaps 10 or 15 years in the case of dogs. And at the end of that commitment, you’ll face the grief and mourning that comes with losing a beloved companion.

[Read: Coping with Losing a Pet]

Other drawbacks to owning a pet include:

**Pets cost money.** Food bills, veterinary care, licenses, grooming costs, toys, bedding, boarding fees, and other maintenance expenses can mount up. If you’re unemployed or elderly, on a limited fixed income, it may be a struggle to cope with the expense of pet ownership.

**Pets require time and attention.** As any dog owner will tell you, there’s nothing therapeutic about coming home to a dog that has been locked up in the house on his own all day. Dogs need daily exercise to stay calm and well-balanced; most other pets require at least daily care and attention.

**Owning a pet can curb some of your social activity.** A dog can only be left alone for a limited time. By training your dog, you’ll be able to take him with you to visit friends, run errands, or sit outside a coffee shop, for example, but you won’t be able to leave for a spur of the moment weekend away without arranging care for your pet first.

**Pets can be destructive.** Any pet can have an occasional accident at home. Some cats may be prone to shredding upholstery, some dogs to chewing shoes. While training can help eradicate negative, destructive behavior, they remain common in animals left alone without exercise or stimulation for long periods of time.

**Pets require responsibility.** Most dogs, regardless of size and breed, are capable of inflicting injury on people if not handled responsibly by their owners. Even cats can scratch or bite. Pet owners need to be alert to any danger, especially around children.

**Pets carry health risks for some people.** While there are some diseases that can be
transmitted from cats and dogs to their human handlers, allergies are the most common health risk of pet ownership. If you or a family member has been diagnosed with a pet allergy, carefully consider whether you can live with the symptoms before committing to pet ownership. Also consider that some friends or relatives with allergies may no longer be able to visit your home if you have a pet.

**How to find the perfect pet**

If you’ve decided that owning a pet is right for you, congratulations: you’re about to open your life to a unique and rewarding relationship. While people who have pets tend to be happier, more independent, and feel more secure than those without pets, it’s important to select the type of pet that best suits your needs and lifestyle.

Talk to other members of your household and agree on the qualities you want in a pet and those that you’d prefer to avoid. In the case of dogs, man’s best friend comes in countless breeds or mix of breeds, each offering a different blend of personality traits.

If you’re looking for something smaller or with less energy, then maybe a cat or a rabbit would be right for you and your family. Here are some things to ask yourself when looking for the perfect pet:

- Do you live in a small apartment or a large house with a backyard? This will greatly determine the size of the animal best suited to your home. For instance, a cat or caged animal may be more suitable to apartment living than a large dog.
- How much time will the animal spend alone each day? If you’re out for most of the day—and don’t intend to hire a pet sitter or use daycare—you’ll want an animal that doesn’t need a lot of attention, rather than a dog.
- Do you live with small children or someone frail or disabled who could be knocked over by a large dog? Maybe a smaller animal would be a safer option.
- How much shedding can you tolerate? Specific dog and cat breeds tend to shed less or you could opt for a pet that doesn’t shed at all, like an iguana or a snake (well, at least not hair).

Ultimately, when choosing a pet, be honest with yourself about the lifestyle you enjoy and the kind of pet you’d like to care for. If you’re in doubt about caring for a larger animal, start small, get a fish or a smaller, caged animal. See how it fits and go from there.
Shelter and rescue animals

Whether mixed breed or purebred, dogs and cats adopted from a shelter or rescue group make excellent pets. For the most part, pets end up in a shelter through no fault of their own. Their owner may have died or moved to a place that doesn’t allow pets, or the pet may have simply been abandoned by irresponsible owners who bought them on a whim and later discovered that they were unable or unwilling to care for them properly. If any shelter or rescue animal exhibits aggressive behavior, it is typically euthanized rather than offered for adoption.

Rescue groups try to find suitable homes for unwanted or abandoned dogs, cats, and other pets, many taken from shelters where they would otherwise have been euthanized. Volunteers usually take care of the animals until they can find a permanent home. This means that rescuers are often very familiar with a pet’s personality and can help advise you on whether the pet would make a good match for your needs.

By adopting an animal from a shelter or rescue organization, you’ll not only be giving a home to a deserving pet, but you’ll also likely be saving an animal’s life.

Alternatives to pet ownership

If you don’t have the time, money, or ability to own a pet full-time, there are still ways you can experience the health benefits of being around animals. You can ask to walk a neighbor’s dog, for example, or volunteer at an animal shelter. Most animal shelters or rescue groups welcome volunteers to help care for homeless pets or assist at adoption events. You’ll not only be helping yourself, but also helping to socialize and exercise the animals, making them more adoptable.

Some animal shelters and rescue groups offer pet “rental” programs. Dogs and cats that are available for adoption can be taken out for walks or play dates. You can also foster an animal temporarily until a permanent home is found for him, or to decide if the animal is right for you.

A variety of different organizations offer specially trained therapy dogs and cats to visit children’s hospitals, assisted living facilities, nursing homes, hospice programs, shelters, and schools. During these visits, people are invited to pet and stroke the animals, which can improve mood and reduce stress and anxiety.