The Health and Mood-Boosting Benefits of Pets

Pets come with some powerful health benefits. Here’s how caring for an animal can help relieve depression and anxiety, lower stress levels, and even 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.

How pets can impact your health

While people with pets often experience the greatest health benefits, a pet doesn’t necessarily have to be a dog or a cat. Even watching fish in an aquarium can help reduce muscle tension and lower 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 or cat 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...
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 a live 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.

**Alternative pets and their benefits**

The health benefits of pets are not limited to just cats and dogs. If you’re thinking of getting a household pet, here are some less common options:

**Snakes and lizards.** You may think that reptiles seem cold, but studies show that lizards and snakes can grow attached to their owners, recognizing those who care, handle, and feed them. Some may even ask to be petted by raising their necks up. A reptilian companion
might also appeal to those who have an allergy to furry pets or find their exotic, unusual beauty attractive.

Rabbits. Another alternative for those who are allergic to dogs or cats is a bunny rabbit. A rabbit can be an exceptional family pet, not as high maintenance as dogs or cats, but with lots of energy and personality. They don’t require a lot of space—a minimum of 4 x 4 feet of living space with opportunity to roam wider each day. If you live in an apartment, a rabbit could be the perfect option. Owning a rabbit can help reduce levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and increase serotonin (“happy hormone”) levels in your brain. Petting or snuggling a furry friend can also help lower blood pressure.

Birds. Companion birds have very long lifespans; some parrot species can even outlive humans. Owning a bird means you can enjoy all the love without having to deal with the grief that comes with losing your pet. Birds also encourage social interaction, which can be beneficial if you live alone, or are elderly and want to keep your mind sharp. Talking and teaching tricks to your bird can promote healthy cognitive function.

Fish. You might have noticed fish tanks in many doctors’ or dentists’ offices, care homes, or other medical facilities. There’s a good reason for this. Keeping and watching fish have been scientifically proven to reduce stress and calm your heart rate.

The health 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.

[Read: Cultivating Happiness]

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 and cats 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 health benefits 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.

[Read: Raising Emotionally Intelligent Children]

- 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 bird can help develop a young and expanding mind by teaching a child empathy and understanding. Kids can talk with their bird without a fear of rejection, which enables them to build their confidence, and even their vocabulary.
• Getting a guinea pig is a great way to teach your child responsibility. Guinea pigs are easy to care for—all they need is a small amount of formulated pelleted food, a large cage, and a vitamin C supplement, which makes them an ideal pet for young children.

Children and adults alike can benefit from playing with pets, which can provide 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.

**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 rabbit is right for you and your family. Here are some things to ask yourself when looking for the perfect pet:

- Where do you live? Apartment or house? This will greatly determine the size of the animal best suited to your home. For instance, a rabbit or cat may be more suitable in an apartment than a dog.
- What’s your lifestyle? Work schedule? If those responsible for caring for the animal are gone most of the day, either at school or work, you may want an animal that doesn’t need constant attention, such as a reptile or fish.
- Who do you live with? Small children or an elderly relative could be knocked over by a large dog, for example, making a cat or rabbit a safer option.
- How big is your backyard? Large dog breeds, for example, often require from more space to run around in and play.
- Do you travel a lot? If you tend to be on the road for work or play, then you’ll want a pet that can be left alone for long periods or easily looked after by a friend or neighbor. Fish or a reptile may be more suitable than a dog or cat.
- How much shedding can you tolerate? If you hate hair, then make sure to look into the breed of animal, because some animals’ hair can get everywhere. The good news is there are many different dog and cat breeds that have minimal shedding. There are also pets that don’t shed at all, like an iguana or a snake (well, at least not hair).
- Ultimately, when choosing a pet, you must be honest with yourself about the lifestyle you’d like to keep and the kind of pet you’d like to care for. If you’re in doubt about caring for a larger animal, then start small, get a fish or a smaller mammal. See how it fits and go from there.

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Best Pet Reptiles for Children - Explores the best reptilian options for young children and family life. (Reptiles Magazine)

Choosing the Best Pet for Your Family - Things to keep in mind when deciding on the right pet for you and your family. (Washington Post)

Teaching Kids Responsibility Through Caring for a Pet - Explores the benefits of what owning a pet can teach your children. (Broadview University)

The Power of Pets - Explores the health benefits of human-animal interactions. (National Institutes of Health)

Pets for the Elderly - A non-profit charity that pays a portion of the adoption fee when a senior adopts a companion pet from one of their participating shelters in the U.S. (The Pets for the Elderly Foundation)

Choosing the Right Dog - Tips on choosing a dog that’s right for you. (Blue Cross for Pets)