

The Benefits of Pets

Anyone who has ever loved a pet knows how much joy that relationship can bring, but there is increasing scientific evidence that the unique bond we share with our pets dramatically enriches our lives, our physical health and our emotional well-being. Pets can help to reduce stress, relieve loneliness and depression, prevent heart disease, and lower health-care costs. Here are the results of some recent studies:

- Dr. Karen Allen, a researcher at the State University of New York at Buffalo, showed that people with hypertension who adopted a dog had lower blood pressure readings in stressful situations than did those who did not own a pet.
- According to a study published in 1999 in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, older people who have pets tend to have better physical health and mental well-being than those who don't.
- The National Institute of Health found that people with pets make fewer doctor visits, especially for non-serious medical conditions.
- In a 2002 survey conducted by the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), 92 percent of the respondents indicated that they derive significant health benefits from their pets.
- In a three-year study of over 5,000 people done by the Baker Medical Research Institute in Melbourne, Australia, pet owners had lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels than people who didn't have pets. The findings couldn't be explained by differences in cigarette smoking, weight, or socioeconomic profile.
- Dr. James Lynch of the Life Care Foundation conducted a study that showed that heart patients who owned pets had a much better chance of long-term survival than patients who didn't own pets.
- Dr. Meredith Wells, an assistant professor of psychology at Eastern Kentucky University, surveyed businesses that allow pets in the workplace and found that employees believe that the animals reduce stress and improve their mental and physical health.



According to the article "For Seniors: Pets Are Just Plain Healthy" from the Delta Society's website (www.deltasociety.org/dsc102.htm), pets offer many benefits for older adults:

- Seniors with dogs go to the doctor less. Dogs help to relieve everyday stress.
- For people aged 65–78, dogs are a major factor in initiating conversations with passersby. Companion animals readily elicit friendly responses.
- Pets promote social interaction, decrease the feeling of loneliness and isolation, and increase morale and optimism.
- Pets encourage playfulness, exercise, and laughter.
- Pets satisfy the need for touch and to be touched, and give nonjudgmental warmth and affection.

Of course, these benefits also apply to the general population. Pets can help anyone of any age connect with other people or other creatures. What dog lover doesn't enthusiastically engage in conversation with another like-minded individual? If you are a very serious, driven person, playing with your dog or cat can be a great source of relaxation and stress relief. Helping to care for another creature can potentially teach children a sense of empathy and responsibility.

Loving and caring for a pet can help anyone fight depression and loneliness, since the bond with a pet helps you maintain a sense of purpose in life. A daily walk with a dog gets you out into the world on a regular basis and encourages exercise, both of which help counteract feelings of depression. Pets can be a great comfort in times of conflict or grief, since they offer unconditional affection. They often seem to know when we are sad, and they are always attentive, nonjudgmental listeners.

Besides their contribution to our general health and well-being, pets are increasingly serving a therapeutic role in hospitals, hospices and nursing homes. More and more, the staff at these facilities are recognizing the value of animal-assisted therapy. Dogs are trained to provide companionship and a calming presence for those who are ill or lonely. Both patient and staff morale improves when therapy animals visit.

Even in prisons, pets are serving a therapeutic role. In the Ohio Corrections System, for example, inmates are matched with dogs and then go through a 10-week course with them, teaching the dogs basic commands and house-training them. The dogs are then adopted out by the local humane society. The inmates form close bonds with their dogs, and saying good-bye is tough, but the experience of caring for another creature is invaluable for men like these, who have often had harsh lives.

For more information on studies done on the human-animal bond and animal-assisted activities and therapy, visit the Delta Society website: www.deltasociety.org.