

The Benefits of Pets for Human Health

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Dana Casciotti, PhD, and Diana Zuckerman, PhD, National Center for Health Research

1. Animals play an important role in many people's lives. Animals can be used in occupational therapy, speech therapy, or physical rehabilitation to help patients recover. Aside from these designated therapeutic roles, animals are also valued as companions, which can certainly affect the quality of our lives. Is that companionship beneficial to our health?

2. Over 71 million American households have a pet, and most people think of their pets as members of the family. Some research studies have found that people who have a pet have healthier hearts, stay home sick less often, make fewer visits to the doctor, get more exercise, and are less depressed. Pets may also have a significant impact on allergies, asthma, social support, and social interactions with other people.

3. Findings suggest that the social support a pet provides can make a person feel more relaxed and decrease stress. Social support from friends and family can have similar benefits, but interpersonal relationships often cause stress as well, whereas pets may be less likely to cause stress. The social support provided by a pet might also encourage more social interactions with people, reducing feelings of isolation or loneliness.

4. Among elderly people, pet ownership might also be an important source of social support that enhances well-being. In one study, elderly individuals that had a dog or cat were better able to perform activities of daily living, such as the ability to climb stairs; bend, kneel, or stoop; take medication; prepare meals; and bathe and dress oneself. There were no significant differences between dog and cat owners in their abilities to perform these activities. Neither the length of time of having a dog or cat nor the level of attachment to the animal influenced performance abilities.

5. Research on allergies and asthma is mixed. Some studies show that having a cat might increase allergen sensitivity, while others show it might protect against cat allergies. A 2013 study found that mice were protected against allergies when they were exposed to dust that came from homes with dogs. The researchers discovered that the protective effect was due to a certain type of gut bacteria that is often present in people with dogs. More research is needed on the connection between allergies, asthma, and pets, but it is possible that the impact of having pets on allergies may depend on the age of the person at the time they are exposed to an animal as well as the type of pet. For example, 6 and 7 year old children who lived with a bird during their first year of life were more likely to have respiratory symptoms compared to children who did not have a bird in the home as an infant. Likewise, researchers say that the timing of when a pet is in the family is also important. Children with dogs or cats in their home during the first year of life are less likely to develop allergies in childhood.

6. As is true with any relationship, some human-pet relationships are likely to be more rewarding than others. Some people are more attached to their pets than others and those feelings could influence the impact of the pet on the person's health. Other factors such as gender and marital status may play a role. For example, one study found that dog ownership was associated with lower rates of depression among women, but not men, and among single individuals but not married people. So, while pet ownership might have a positive impact on well-being, it doesn't affect everyone the same way.