

Pet Benefits: Dog Ownership Linked to 65% Drop in Death Risk After Heart Attack

Two more studies have been added to the growing body of research about the health benefits of pets. They were [touted by the American Heart Association](#) and published this month [October 2019] in its journal called *Circulation: Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes*.



By Mark Robison

The first looked at almost 200,000 Swedes who'd had a heart attack or ischemic stroke (lack of blood to the heart) between 2001 and 2012. Because Swedes are required to register their dogs, researchers could determine which ones had dogs and compare the outcomes of dog owners vs. non-dog owners.

Compared to people who did not own a dog, the American Heart Association reported, researchers found that for dog owners:

- The risk of death for heart attack patients living alone after hospitalization was 33% lower, and 15% lower for those living with a partner or child.
- The risk of death for stroke patients living alone after hospitalization was 27% lower and 12% lower for those living with a partner or child.

In other words, owning a dog was beneficial no matter one's living arrangements, but the health benefits were about twice as significant for people living alone.

The second study was much larger in scope. It was a meta-analysis of 10 studies comprising health results from 3.8 million people. Researchers found that compared to non-owners, dog owners experienced a:

- 24% reduced risk of death from any cause (aka "all-cause mortality").
- 65% reduced risk of death after a heart attack.
- 31% reduced risk of death from cardiovascular-related issues.

Dr. Glenn Levine of the American Heart Association summed up the findings in a news release, "While these non-randomized studies cannot 'prove' that adopting or owning a dog directly leads to reduced mortality, these robust findings are certainly at least suggestive of this."

None of this means you should run out and get a dog for a loved one whose health you worry about. Tove Fall, a professor at Uppsala University in Sweden, said about the first study's results: "From an animal welfare perspective, dogs should only be acquired by people who feel they have the capacity and knowledge to give the pet a good life."



That said, there are many wonderful dogs in shelters and with rescue groups who need homes. This situation is a win-win – a homeless dog gets a loving home, and a person gets a new friend and perhaps better health.

If a new dog seems like too much to take on, consider fostering. Many shelters have programs where people can take pets temporarily into their homes for a few days or weeks to a few months. Such efforts help dogs get out of the stressful shelter environment and gain socialization skills, making them better candidates for adoption, without a long-term commitment.

Speaking personally, I know my dog – a pit mix named Thoreau – lifts my spirits. For one thing, he makes me smile a lot, especially when he wriggles on his back showing off his pink and white belly. And he gets me to take him for a walk in the desert twice a day, which lessens my time staring at a screen and gets my heart pumping. His joy bounding out the door is infectious. In short, both our lives are better because of our time together.

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