

Many Human Health Benefits Linked to Having a Pet

It's well-known that pets can be great for your health. The usual reasons cited are that having a dog inspires people to get more exercise because of the need for regular walks, and that petting an animal has been found to decrease cortisol levels, which decreases stress.



By Mark Robison

Those are both fabulous side benefits of having a pet, but they are not the only ones.

- **General health:** In one study, people were tracked after getting a cat or dog from a shelter. This was done by J.A. Serpell and published in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine. Significant reductions in the frequency of minor ailments such as headaches and colds were noted one month after adoption.
- **Heart health:** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health have conducted studies finding that pet owners have decreased blood pressure, cholesterol and triglyceride levels. These indicators are linked to a lower chance of heart attacks. Or, as Glenn N. Levine, a professor at the Baylor School of Medicine in Houston, said in an article for the American Heart Association, “In essence, data suggest that there probably is an association between pet ownership and decreased cardiovascular risk.”

One corroborating study happened in Australia, where more than 5,000 seniors were interviewed at a screening clinic for heart disease. The ones with a companion animal were found to have significantly lower levels of triglycerides, which are fat in the blood that can cause hardening of the arteries or thickening of artery walls.

- **Helping children:** The University of Wisconsin's James E. Gern published a study in the Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology in 2004 that found having a pet in the home can decrease the chance a child will develop an allergy to pet dander by up to 33% – and that it tended to cause them to have stronger immune systems overall.

Last year, the NIH reported in its newsletter about how the act of responsibility associated with having a pet benefits some children. “A recent study showed that caring for fish helped teens with diabetes better manage their disease,” the NIH newsletter says. “Researchers had a group of teens with type 1 diabetes care for a pet fish twice a day by feeding and checking water levels. The caretaking routine also included changing the tank water each week. This was paired with the children reviewing their blood glucose (blood sugar) logs with parents.”

For me personally, though, the main benefit is that pets are just fun. They make me smile and laugh. There's a visualization exercise I sometimes do to destress where you sit calmly, close your eyes and think – really think – about a time when you've felt joy. And many of the most joyful moments that pop into my mind involve animals I've shared my life with. So if you're on the fence about getting a cat or dog, come for the health benefits and stay for the joy.



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