

Health Insights Today

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Health Benefits of Companion Animals

By Christina Hering

Lulu, a pot-bellied pig, saved her owner's life after the woman had suffered a heart attack. She exited the house through a dog door, opened a secured gate and made her way to the street where she lay in front of a car. She then led its puzzled driver back to her home where he found Lulu's guardian collapsed on the floor, at which time he alerted the medics. Lulu is a prime example of the many stories where animals save the lives of their owners.¹

The Human-Animal Bond

Sharing your life with an animal can enhance your health and well-being in many ways. Evidence of the benefits given to us by our animal companions is quite compelling.

Humans have had companion animals for thousands of years. But why? Something about animals attracted us to them and caused us to seek out and enjoy their company. Acknowledgment of the health benefits of animal companionship can be traced back to 1790s England when animals were brought in to help mental patients.² In the mid-1940s, pigs, cattle, horses, and poultry helped many World War II veterans at an Army Air Corps Convalescent Hospital who had suffered mental trauma during the war.²

Beginning in the 1960s and continuing today, scientists have studied the effects of animals on human health.³ Most recent research has focused on cardiovascular benefits, alerts about health emergencies, and effects on the health and well being of children and the elderly.

Cardiovascular and Stress Benefits

In the United States, the first and third leading causes of death—heart disease and hypertension—are cardiovascular in nature.⁴ High blood pressure, high cholesterol, high triglyceride levels, and the many adverse effects of sedentary lifestyles have reached epidemic levels. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, animal companionship can improve all these problem areas.⁵ A three-year study by the Baker Medical Research Institute involving over 5000 participants showed that pet owners had lower blood pressure and cholesterol levels than non-pet owners, even after smoking, weight, and socioeconomic levels were taken into consideration.⁶ In a related study, Erika Friedmann, PhD, of the University of Maryland School of Nursing, found that pet owners who experienced heart attacks had increased one-year survival rates compared to those without animal companionship.³

The presence of animals also has a positive effect on people's reactions to stress. Investigators at the State University of New York at Buffalo found that patients with hypertension who owned pets had lower blood pressure levels when put in stressful situations.⁶ Animals' apparent ability to decrease their owners' spikes in blood pressure and heart rate due to stress (as measured in New York stockbrokers and children undergoing physical examinations) appears to be more effective than taking ACE-inhibiting medications (which dilate blood vessels, thus lowering blood pressure).^{7,8} These effects are not limited to cats and dogs; similar decreases in stress have been seen in people caring for parakeets and hamsters, or even staring at fish in an aquarium.^{9,21}

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Healing Effects of Laughter

My three dogs and cat can be quite a handful, in a good way. Not a day goes by when my fiancé and I are not relieved to come home and spend time with them. And not a day goes by without at least one of them getting involved in some antic that gives us great cause for laughter. Laughter, in turn, has beneficial effects on heart health. In a study at the University of Maryland Medical Center, a group led by Michael Miller, MD, at the Center of Preventive Cardiology concluded that laughter can indeed be the “best medicine” for the heart. Miller’s study, the first to indicate that laughter helps prevent heart disease, found that people with heart disease were 40 percent less likely to laugh in a variety of situations compared to people the same age without heart disease.¹⁰

Animals’ Ability to Discover an Owner’s Illness

Gill Lacey, recently interviewed by CBS News, is convinced that his Dalmatian Trudi saved his life. Trudi showed a great deal of interest in a mole on Gill’s leg, prompting him to have it checked by a doctor. This mole turned out to be a malignant melanoma. Many similar stories have been reported over the years involving different kinds of cancer, including less apparent types such as breast cancer.¹¹ Research by Donald Broom, Professor of Animal Welfare at the Cambridge University Veterinary School in Great Britain, has shown that dogs can be trained to identify bladder cancer in fluid and tissue samples.¹¹

Dogs’ amazing sense of smell has also been beneficial for owners that suffer from epilepsy and diabetes. Dot, a Border Collie I knew when I lived in Manhattan, Kansas, is a family dog that was trained to alert the family’s son, Jon, of upcoming epileptic seizures. Dot’s success at this allowed Jon to live a much more normal teenage life as well as allowing Dot to enjoy many new experiences as she accompanied him throughout the day. Similar situations exist with some animals whose owners are prone to hypoglycemia. These animals are able to inform their guardians soon enough after a drop in blood sugar to avert negative consequences.⁸

Allergies

Allergies can often be helped by sharing a home with cats and dogs. Researchers at the Medical College of Georgia reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that “infants in homes with at least two animals were up to 77 percent less likely to develop allergies.”¹² They studied 474 children over a six to seven year period, and theorized that the immune systems of those that did not develop allergies may have been strengthened through exposure to bacteria carried by pets.¹³

Special Needs Children, Disturbed Teens

Children with access to animals have also shown improvements in behavioral health. Aaron Katcher, MD, who works with youngsters diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD), has observed “significant improvement in behavior when the children were allowed to interact with animals.”^{13,14} Children with autism who live with pets have been shown to exhibit more pro-social behaviors and decreased autistic behaviors.^{15,16}

Professionals have developed programs geared to helping children with special needs. A program called Reading Fur Fun is popular and successful.¹⁷ In this program, children with difficulty reading spend time reading to dogs.¹⁷ According to Debra Dyjak, a volunteer in the program, “Many kids are reluctant to read, but because a dog doesn’t

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criticize or correct, they feel more confident reading to him.”¹⁷ Studies have also shown that children who have cared for animals have higher levels of self-esteem.^{3,18}

While programs such as Reading Fur Fun increase self-confidence, others increase empathy. Many such programs have been set up in juvenile treatment institutions, with troubled teens being paired with troubled dogs that need to be trained before they qualify for adoption. Tom McGinn, the superintendent at one such treatment facility, says, “Empathy is something most Totem Town residents lack . . . But it’s an important lesson for them to learn.”¹⁹ These problem teens likely see similarities between their own circumstances and those of the dogs. Dogs that change their behaviors get a second chance, a very helpful lesson for teens who also need a second chance. Research has also demonstrated that children have increased scores on empathy and pro-social orientation scales when they live with pets.¹⁵

Seniors: Improved Health and Quality of Life

Children and teens are not the only special populations to benefit from interacting with animals. Investigators have also found that pets have a positive effect on the elderly. According to studies in the *Journal of American Geriatrics Society* and the *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, seniors who live with pets have considerably increased physical health and mental well being.^{6,20,21} This approach has paid off, literally, in nursing homes. Those that incorporated companion animal programs saw declines in prescription drug use by patients and in the total cost of care.⁸ Related studies found that people sharing homes with animals experienced fewer minor health problems and needed fewer medical appointments.^{8,15,22,23} Participants that lived with a dog reported a 50 percent decrease in minor health problems.²²

An important indicator of seniors’ well-being is the ability to maintain their Activities of Daily Living (ADL). ADL levels decrease more slowly in seniors who have pets.¹⁵ Feelings of social isolation and depression are another key area of concern for the elderly. People, including strangers, usually react in a kindly manner when a companion animal is present, which can provide an easy way to begin conversations.^{5,6} And as anyone who has lived with an animal knows, the company of pets can help to alleviate feelings of loneliness.

These benefits for the elderly caught the eye of Mayo Clinic oncologist Edward T. Creagan, MD, who aptly summarized the value of animals in the lives of humans everywhere: “We all need something to live for and something to focus on, besides ourselves. Pets offer us unconditional love, which is of significant benefit to our overall well being.”²⁰

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