

6 Ways Pets Can Improve Your Health

By Lisa Fields

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Have you ever noticed that you feel better when you're around your pet?

It's true. Spending quality time with a dog, cat or other animal can have a positive impact on your mood and your health. Pets can be calming stress-fighters.

"We found that pet owners, on average, were better off than non-owners, especially when they have a higher-quality relationship with their pets," says pet researcher Allen R. McConnell, PhD. He's a professor of psychology at Miami University. "What [makes] a meaningful relationship varies from person to person."

For some active people, that includes playing ball or Frisbee in the park. For others who can't get outside, just petting your dog can help you feel connected.

Pets can help you in other ways, too.

1. A Healthier Heart

Your dog may make you less likely to get heart disease. Why? Dog owners walk more and have lower blood pressure than people who don't have dogs.

Pets can also be good for you if you already have heart problems.

Heart attack survivors and people with serious abnormal heart rhythms who own dogs live longer than people with the same heart problems who don't have pets, studies show.

2. Stress Soothers

Petting your cat or dog feels good. It can lower your blood pressure, helps your body release a relaxation hormone, and cuts down on levels of a stress hormone.

It also soothes your pet, says Alan Beck, ScD, director of the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University.

3. Social Magnets

Pets, especially dogs, can help you connect with other people.

"If I saw you walking down the street, I couldn't comfortably start talking to you if I didn't know you, but I could if you had a dog," Beck says. "It's an acceptable interaction that otherwise wouldn't be possible."

People who use wheelchairs say that other people make eye contact with them more often and ask if they can be of help when they're with their dogs, Beck says.

4. Better Mood, More Meaning

People with pets are generally happier, more trusting, and less lonely than those who don't have pets. They also visit the doctor less often for minor problems.

One reason for that may be that your pet gives you a sense of belonging and meaning, McConnell says. "You feel like you have greater control of your life."

5. Benefits for Baby's Immune System

Babies raised in families that have pets may be less likely to get allergies and asthma, some studies show.

It has to start early, ideally before a baby is 6 months old, says Beck.

Babies with dogs or cats at home have fewer colds and ear infections during their first year than babies living in pet-free homes, one study found.

6. Social Support for Autistic Children

Kids tend to relate better to their classmates who have autism when pets are in the classroom, Beck has found in his research.

"Animals change the classroom environment and help to integrate those who are a little less typical," Beck says. "Once the children get involved with animals, they view each other more positively and work together better."