

Health Benefits of Animal Companions

Animals enrich and affect our lives in countless ways. Those who have a companion animal understand that the human-animal bond provides important benefits including potentially positive effects on our health. Although it doesn't take scientific research for pet owners to comprehend the health benefits associated with loving their companions, science has provided proof of this assertion. As if humans could ask for more than the unconditional love that pets offer, our companions go above and beyond by providing life saving advantages.

What do the scientists say?

Focused scientific interest believe the discovery of health effects from pet companionship emerged several decades ago but the results have been conflicting. This is primarily due to the difficulty in separating the direct effects of pets from the potential health impact of other lifestyle and socioeconomic factors. However, most studies show that the attachment between people and their pets seems to have important physiological and psychological effects. In 1992, one study reported lower levels of accepted risk factors of heart disease (blood pressure, plasma triglycerides and cholesterol levels) in pet owners than in non-owners despite equivalent body mass, smoking habits and socioeconomic profiles. A report in 2002 outlined similar effects when examining the physiological responses to mental challenges and pain in the presence and absence of pets, friends and spouses. This study showed that: 1) relative to people without pets at home, their counterparts with pets had significantly lower heart rates and blood pressure both during rest and periods of stress and 2) that stress induced the lowest physiologic response when pets were with their owners during measurement. Other positive effects on health and behavior have also been observed. Studies have shown that people who live with pets tend to exercise more (particularly dog owners), have fewer illnesses and spend more time in positive social interactions. Pets have been shown to help people overcome shyness, develop trust, enhance social skills and cope with illness.

Interestingly, one study in 2001 showed that even in the workplace people benefit psychologically and organizationally from animal companionship. In this study, participants who were allowed to bring their pets to work perceived a reduced stress level and experienced positive effects on their health and overall organization over those who did not bring their pets to the office or did not have pets.

As our elderly population increases, there is a rising concern for the well being of seniors. Do pets positively contribute to their health status? Most studies assert that they do. One analysis, conducted in 1990, evaluated 938 Medicare enrollees for one year. The study showed that respondents who owned pets reported fewer doctor visits and less difficulty coping with stressful life-events than those who didn't have companion animals. The benefits of pet ownership on human health and behavior were also shown in a one-year study in 1998 of 1,000 non-institutionalized adults over 65 years of age. The study measured potential effects of the human-animal bond on the participant's physical and psychological health, and whether the presence or absence of a companion animal modified their social network. Standardized scoring methodologies were used to assess the level of attachment to pets (for pet owners), health (ability to perform Activities of Daily Living [ADLs]), and psychological/social network status. The researchers found that ADL levels were maintained or enhanced and that there were beneficial effects on social support networks and psychological well-being for owners of pets versus non-owners.

Additional studies support the idea that pets can provide seniors with physical contact and comfort, decrease loneliness and depression, and serve as an external attention focus. Pets in nursing homes have been associated with decreased psychotropic medication usage and a greater than 50 percent reduction in healthcare costs.

In addition, animal companions aid in reducing depression among sufferers. Pets can help abate loneliness and depression while promoting interest in life. When faced with adversity or trauma, pet owners fare far better than those without the unconditional bond from animals. Their love provides a sense of security which may lessen the strain of depression.

While there remains some scientific controversy regarding the human health benefits of companion animals, most studies support the positive effects of pets of all types. As such, many animals are now included in our approach to health care where they work as counselors, confidants, educators and friends. Whether the observed effects are physiological, psychological or a combination of many factors, these studies tell us something about the human-animal bond that we have probably always intuitively known: love heals. As science has proved that humans are happiest and healthiest when surrounded by friends and family, science has also shown us that humans benefit similarly with the love of animals.

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