

## PETS

# The Health and Mood-Boosting Benefits of Pets

Pets come with some powerful health benefits. Here's how caring for a dog, cat, or other animal can help relieve depression and anxiety, lower stress, and improve your heart health.

By [Lawrence Robinson](#) and [Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.](#)

Last updated or reviewed on February 5, 2024

## The benefits of pets

Most pet owners are clear about the immediate joys that come with sharing their lives with companion animals. However, many of us remain unaware of the physical and mental health benefits that can also accompany the pleasure of snuggling up to a furry friend. It's only recently that studies have begun to scientifically explore the benefits of the human-animal bond.

Pets have evolved to become acutely attuned to humans and our behavior and emotions. Dogs, for example, are able to understand many of the words we use, but they're even better at interpreting our tone of voice, body language, and gestures. And like any good human friend, a loyal dog will look into your eyes to gauge your emotional state and try to understand what you're thinking and feeling (and to work out when the next walk or treat might be coming, of course).

Pets, especially dogs and cats, can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, ease loneliness, encourage exercise and playfulness, and even improve your cardiovascular health. Caring for an animal can help children grow up more secure and active. Pets also provide valuable companionship for older adults. Perhaps most importantly, though, a pet can add real joy and unconditional love to your life.

## Any pet can improve your health

While it's true that people with pets often experience greater health benefits than those without, a pet doesn't necessarily have to be a dog or a cat. A rabbit could be ideal if you're allergic to other animals or have limited space but still want a furry friend to snuggle with. Birds can encourage social interaction and help keep your mind sharp if you're an older adult. Snakes, lizards, and other reptiles can make for exotic companions. Even watching fish in an aquarium can help reduce muscle tension and lower your pulse rate.

Studies have shown that:

- Pet owners are less likely to suffer from [depression](#) than those without pets.
- People with pets have [lower blood pressure](#) in stressful situations than those without pets. One study even found that when people with borderline hypertension adopted dogs from a shelter, their blood pressure declined significantly within five months.
- Playing with a dog, cat, or other pet can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine, which calm and relax.
- Pet owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels (indicators of heart disease) than those without pets.
- Heart attack patients with pets survive longer than those without.
- Pet owners over age 65 make 30 percent fewer visits to their doctors than those without pets.

One of the reasons for these therapeutic effects is that pets fulfill the basic human need for touch. Even hardened criminals in prison show long-term changes in their behavior after interacting with pets, many of them experiencing mutual affection for the first time. Stroking, hugging, or otherwise touching a loving animal can [rapidly calm and soothe](#) you when you're stressed or anxious. The companionship of a pet can also [ease loneliness](#), and most dogs are a great stimulus for healthy exercise, which can substantially boost your mood and ease depression.

## How pets can improve your lifestyle

Adopting healthy lifestyle changes plays an important role in easing [symptoms of depression](#), anxiety, stress, bipolar disorder, and PTSD. Caring for a pet can help you make healthy lifestyle changes by:

**Increasing exercise.** Taking a dog for a walk, hike, or run are fun and rewarding ways to fit [healthy daily exercise](#) into your schedule. Studies have shown that dog owners are far more likely to meet their daily exercise requirements—and exercising every day is great for the animal as well. It will deepen the connection between you, eradicate most behavior problems in dogs, and keep your pet fit and healthy.

**Providing companionship.** Companionship can help prevent illness and even add years to your life, while isolation and loneliness can trigger symptoms of depression. Caring for an animal can help make you feel needed and wanted, and take the focus away from your problems, especially if you live alone. Most dog and [cat owners](#) talk to their pets, some even use them to work through their troubles. And nothing beats loneliness like coming home to a wagging tail or purring cat.

**Helping you meet new people.** Pets can be a great social lubricant for their owners, helping you start and maintain [new friendships](#). Dog owners frequently stop and talk to each other on walks, hikes, or in a dog park. Pet owners also meet new people in pet stores, clubs, and training classes.

**Reducing anxiety.** The companionship of an animal can offer comfort, help [ease anxiety](#), and build self-confidence for people anxious about going out into the world. Because pets [tend to live in the moment](#)—they don't worry about what happened yesterday or what might happen tomorrow—they can help you become more mindful and appreciate the joy of the present.

**Adding structure and routine to your day.** Many pets, especially dogs, require a regular feeding and exercise schedule. Having a consistent routine keeps an animal balanced and calm—and it can work for you, too. No matter your mood—depressed, anxious, or stressed—one plaintive look from your pet and you'll have to get out of bed to feed, exercise, and care for them.

[\[Read: Coping with Depression\]](#)

**Providing sensory stress relief.** Touch and movement are two healthy ways to [quickly manage stress](#). Stroking a dog, cat, or other animal can lower blood pressure and help you quickly feel calmer and less stressed.

## Get a dog, lose weight

A number of studies have linked owning a dog to losing weight:

- A year-long study at the Wellness Institute at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Chicago found that walking an overweight dog helped both the animals and their owners shed unwanted pounds. Researchers found that the dogs provided support in similar ways to a human exercise buddy, but with greater consistency and without any negative influence.
- Another study by the Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction found that public housing residents who walked therapy dogs for up to 20 minutes five days a week lost an average of 14.4 pounds in a year, without changing their diets.
- A third study, conducted by dog food manufacturer Mars Petcare, found that people with a dog walked 30 minutes more per week than they did before owning a dog.

## The benefits of pets for older adults

As well as providing vital companionship, owning a pet can play an important role in [healthy aging](#) by helping you to:

**Find meaning and joy in life.** As you age, you'll lose things that previously occupied your time and gave your life purpose. You may retire from your career or your children may move far away. Caring for a pet can bring pleasure and help boost your morale, optimism, and sense of self-worth. Choosing to adopt a pet from a shelter, especially an older pet, can add to your sense of fulfillment, knowing that you've provided a home to a pet that may otherwise have been euthanized.

[\[Read: Cultivating Happiness\]](#)

**Stay connected.** Maintaining a social network isn't always easy as you grow older. [Retirement](#), illness, death, and relocation can take away close friends and family members. And making new friends can get harder. Pets, especially dogs, are a great way for older adults to spark up conversations and [meet new people](#).

**Boost your vitality.** You can overcome many of the physical challenges associated with aging by taking good care of yourself. Dogs, cats, and other pets [encourage playfulness](#), laughter, and exercise, which can help boost

your immune system and increase your energy.

## How pets help adults with Alzheimer's disease or dementia

As part of the disease, [Alzheimer's patients](#) may exhibit a variety of behavioral problems, many related to an inability to deal with stress.

- Research at the University of California at Davis concluded that Alzheimer's patients suffer less stress and have fewer anxious outbursts if there is a dog or cat in the home.
- Pets can provide a source of positive, nonverbal communication. The playful interaction and gentle touch from a well-trained, docile animal can help soothe an Alzheimer's patient and [decrease aggressive behavior](#)—as can simply being exposed to bright aquariums or fish tanks.
- In many cases a patient's problem behavior is a reaction to the stressed response of the primary caretaker. Pets can help ease the stress of caregivers. Cats or caged animals may be more suitable than dogs, which generally require more care and can add to the burden of someone who's already looking after an Alzheimer's patient.

## The benefits of pets for children

Not only do children who grow up with pets have less risk of allergies and asthma, many also learn responsibility, compassion, and empathy from having a dog or cat.

[\[Read: Raising Emotionally Intelligent Children\]](#)

- Unlike parents or teachers, pets are never critical and don't give orders. They are always loving and their mere presence at home can help provide a sense of security in children. Having an ever-present pet can help [ease separation anxiety in children](#) when mom and dad aren't around.
- Having the love and companionship of a pet can make a child feel important and help them develop a positive self-image.
- Kids who are emotionally attached to their pets are better able to build relationships with other people.
- Studies have also shown that pets can help calm hyperactive or overly aggressive kids. Of course, both the animal and the child need to be trained to behave appropriately with each other.
- A pet can help develop a young and expanding mind by teaching a child [empathy](#) and understanding. Kids can talk with their pet without a fear of rejection, which enables them to build their confidence, and even their vocabulary.
- Getting even a small, caged pet, such as a guinea pig or hamster, is a great way to teach a child responsibility.

Like adults, children can benefit from playing with a pet. It can be a source of calmness and relaxation, as well as a source of stimulation for the brain and body. Playing with a pet can even be a doorway to learning for a child. It can stimulate a child's imagination and curiosity. The rewards of training a dog to perform a new trick, for example, can teach kids the importance of perseverance. Caring for a furry friend can also offer another benefit to a child: immense joy.

## Children with learning disorders and other challenges

Some children with [autism or other learning difficulties](#) are better able to interact with pets than people. Autistic children often rely on nonverbal cues to communicate, just as animals do. And learning to first connect with a pet may even help an autistic child in their interactions with people.

- Pets can help children with learning disabilities learn how to regulate stress and calm themselves, making them better equipped to overcome the challenges of their disorder.
- Playing and exercising with a dog or cat can help a child with learning disorders stay alert and attentive throughout the day. It can also be a great antidote to stress and frustration caused by the learning disability.
- Learning to ride a horse at a local riding stable can help elevate the self-esteem of disabled children, putting them on a more equal level with kids without disabilities.

## Owning a pet is a major commitment

Despite all the benefits, it's important to remember that a pet is not a miracle cure for mental health issues. Owning a pet is beneficial and comforting **only** for those who love and appreciate domestic animals and have the time and money to keep a pet happy and healthy. If you're simply not an "animal person," pet ownership is not going to provide you with any health benefits or improve your life.

Even if you love animals, it's important to understand everything that caring for a pet entails. Owning a pet is a major commitment that will last through the animal's lifetime, perhaps 10 or 15 years in the case of dogs. And at the end of that commitment, you'll face the grief and mourning that comes with losing a beloved companion.

[\[Read: Coping with Losing a Pet\]](#)

Other drawbacks to owning a pet include:

**Pets cost money.** Food bills, veterinary care, licenses, grooming costs, toys, bedding, boarding fees, and other maintenance expenses can mount up. If you're unemployed or elderly, on a limited fixed income, it may be a struggle to cope with the expense of pet ownership.

**Pets require time and attention.** As any dog owner will tell you, there's nothing therapeutic about coming home to a dog that has been locked up in the house on his own all day. Dogs need daily exercise to stay calm and well-balanced; most other pets require at least daily care and attention.

**Owning a pet can curb some of your social activity.** A dog can only be left alone for a limited time. By training your dog, you'll be able to take him with you to visit friends, run errands, or sit outside a coffee shop, for example, but you won't be able to leave for a spur of the moment weekend away without arranging care for your pet first.

**Pets can be destructive.** Any pet can have an occasional accident at home. Some cats may be prone to shredding upholstery, some dogs to chewing shoes. While training can help eradicate negative, destructive behavior, they remain common in animals left alone without exercise or stimulation for long periods of time.

**Pets require responsibility.** Most dogs, regardless of size and breed, are capable of inflicting injury on people if not handled responsibly by their owners. Even cats can scratch or bite. Pet owners need to be alert to any danger, especially around children.

**Pets carry health risks for some people.** While there are some diseases that can be transmitted from cats and dogs to their human handlers, allergies are the most common health risk of pet ownership. If you or a family member has been diagnosed with a pet allergy, carefully consider whether you can live with the symptoms before committing to pet ownership. Also consider that some friends or relatives with allergies may no longer be able to visit your home if you have a pet.

## How to find the perfect pet

If you've decided that owning a pet is right for you, congratulations: you're about to open your life to a unique and rewarding relationship. While people who have pets tend to be happier, more independent, and feel more secure than those without pets, it's important to select the type of pet that best suits your needs and lifestyle.

[\[Read: Choosing the Right Dog\]](#)

Talk to other members of your household and agree on the qualities you want in a pet and those that you'd prefer to avoid.

### Lifestyle considerations that influence your choice in a pet

**Little outdoor activity.** If most of your time is spent at home, consider pets that would be happy to stay with you in that environment. You may enjoy playing with or cuddling a cat or a bunny; taking leisurely walks with an older dog; watching fish or reptiles; or talking or singing along with a bird.

**High activity level.** If you're more active and enjoy daily activities outside of your home, especially walking or running, an energetic dog might be right for you. Canine companions thrive on outdoor exercise, keeping you on the move.

**Small children and the elderly.** Families with small children or elderly living in their homes should consider the size and energy level of a pet. Puppies and kittens are usually very active, but delicate creatures that must be handled with care. Large or rambunctious dogs could accidentally harm or knock over a small child or adult who is unsteady on his or her feet.

**Other animals in household.** Consider the ongoing happiness and ability to adjust of the pets you already have. While your cat or a dog might love to have an animal friend to play with, a pet that has had exclusive access to your attentions may resent sharing you.

**Home environment.** If a neat, tidy home, free of animal hair, occasional muddy footprints and "accidents" is important, then a free-roaming dog or long-haired cat may not be the best choice. You may want to choose pets that are confined to their quarters, such as fish, birds, hamsters, or reptiles.

**Landscaping concerns.** With certain pets, your landscaping will suffer. Many dogs will be tempted to dig holes in your lawn, and dog urine can leave yellow patches—some say unaltered females cause the most damage.

**Time commitment.** Finally, and perhaps most importantly, keep in mind that you'll be making a commitment that will last the lifetime of the pet—perhaps 10, 15, or 20 years with a dog or cat; as many as 30 years or more with a bird. You can, of course, consider adopting an older dog or cat from a shelter or rescue group and provide a deserving animal with a loving home for its senior years.

Ultimately, when choosing a pet, be honest with yourself about the lifestyle you enjoy and the kind of pet you'd like to care for. If you're in doubt about caring for a larger animal, start small, get a fish or a smaller, caged animal. See how it fits and go from there.

## Shelter and rescue animals

Whether mixed breed or purebred, dogs and cats adopted from a shelter or rescue group make excellent pets. For the most part, pets end up in a shelter through no fault of their own. Their owner may have died or moved to a place that doesn't allow pets, or the pet may have simply been abandoned by irresponsible owners who bought them on a whim and later discovered that they were unable or unwilling to care for them properly. If any shelter or rescue animal exhibits aggressive behavior, it is typically euthanized rather than offered for adoption.

Rescue groups try to find suitable homes for unwanted or abandoned dogs, cats, and other pets, many taken from shelters where they would otherwise have been euthanized. Volunteers usually take care of the animals until they can find a permanent home. This means that rescuers are often very familiar with a pet's personality and can help advise you on whether the pet would make a good match for your needs.

By adopting an animal from a shelter or rescue organization, you'll not only be giving a home to a deserving pet, but you'll also likely be saving an animal's life.

## Avoid puppies sold in pet stores and online

Puppy mills are like dog-making factories that churn out puppies for profit, ignoring the needs of the pups and their mothers. The mother dogs spend their entire lives in cramped cages or kennels with little or no personal attention or quality of life. When the mother and father dogs can no longer breed, they are discarded or killed. Dogs from puppy mills are often sick and unsocialized.

There are also more than 10,000 puppy mills in the United States alone, and they commonly sell online or via classified ads, flea markets, and pet stores. In fact, the majority of puppies sold in pet stores and online are from puppy mills—even though the sellers promote themselves as “responsible” breeders or promise “home-raised” puppies.

To help stop this cycle of cruelty, choose to adopt your next pet from a shelter or rescue group, or by purchasing a dog only from a responsible breeder who will show you where the puppy—and its mother—were born and raised.

Source: The Humane Society of the United States

## Choosing between a dog or a cat

Dogs and cats are the most common household pets. While on occasion, you'll see someone walking a cat on a leash or a dog that uses a litter box, typically the needs and natural behaviors of dogs and cats are different:

### Indoors or outdoors

**Cats:** House cats do enjoy being outdoors sometimes, but can wander off.

**Dogs:** Dogs need daily exercise and walks outdoors. Even if you have a large, fenced backyard where they can run and go to the bathroom, they will still need a daily walk.

### Training

**Cats:** Essential training of cats usually includes using the litter box and not clawing furniture. Cats resist training.



**Dogs:** Dogs need much more training than cats. Most dogs enjoy training, because it gives them something to do. They also have an innate desire to please their people.

## Personality

**Cats:** If you love serenity and independence mixed with playfulness, a cat is more likely to satisfy you.

**Dogs:** If you want to be greeted exuberantly every time you come home, a dog is a better choice.

[\[Read: Choosing the Right Cat\]](#)

## Sociability

**Cats:** Cats are often content to be left alone (except, of course, when you'd rather they leave you alone).

**Dogs:** Dogs tend to thrive on interaction with humans and other dogs.

## Alternatives to pet ownership

If you don't have the time, money, or ability to own a pet full-time, there are still ways you can experience the health benefits of being around animals. Even short periods spent with a dog or cat can benefit both you and the animal.

You can ask to walk a neighbor's dog, for example, or [volunteer](#) at an animal shelter. Most animal shelters or rescue groups welcome volunteers to help care for homeless pets or assist at adoption events. You'll not only be helping yourself, but also helping to socialize and exercise the animals, making them more adoptable.

Some animal shelters and rescue groups offer pet "rental" programs. Dogs and cats that are available for adoption can be taken out for walks or play dates. You can also foster an animal temporarily until a permanent home is found for him, or to decide if the animal is right for you.

A variety of different organizations offer specially trained [therapy dogs](#) and cats to visit children's hospitals, assisted living facilities, nursing homes, hospice programs, shelters, and schools. During these visits, people are invited to pet and stroke the animals, which can improve mood and reduce stress and anxiety.

## More Information

## References

01. Christian, H., Wood, L., Nathan, A., Kawachi, I., Houghton, S., Martin, K., & McCune, S. (2016). The association between dog walking, physical activity and owner's perceptions of safety: Cross-sectional evidence from the US and Australia. *BMC Public Health*, 16(1), 1010.
02. Clements, H., Valentin, S., Jenkins, N., Rankin, J., Baker, J. S., Gee, N., Snellgrove, D., & Sloman, K. (2019). The effects of interacting with fish in aquariums on human health and well-being: A systematic review. *PLOS ONE*, 14(7), e0220524.
03. Cracknell, D., White, M. P., Pahl, S., Nichols, W. J., & Depledge, M. H. (2016). Marine Biota and Psychological Well-Being: A Preliminary Examination of Dose-Response Effects in an Aquarium Setting. *Environment and Behavior*, 48(10), 1242-1269.
04. Fritz, C. L., Farver, T. B., Kass, P. H., & Hart, L. A. (1995). Association with Companion Animals and the Expression of Noncognitive Symptoms in Alzheimer's Patients: *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 183(7), 459-463.
05. Johnson, R. A., & Meadows, R. L. (2010). Dog-Walking: Motivation for Adherence to a Walking Program. *Clinical Nursing Research*, 19(4), 387-402.
06. Kushner, R. F., Blatner, D. J., Jewell, D. E., & Rudloff, K. (2006). The PPET Study: People and Pets Exercising Together\*. *Obesity*, 14(10), 1762-1770.
07. Levine, G. N., Allen, K., Braun, L. T., Christian, H. E., Friedmann, E., Taubert, K. A., Thomas, S. A., Wells, D. L., & Lange, R. A. (2013). Pet Ownership and Cardiovascular Risk: A Scientific Statement From the American Heart Association. *Circulation*, 127(23), 2353-2363.
08. Martin, F., Bachert, K. E., Snow, L., Tu, H.-W., Belahbib, J., & Lyn, S. A. (2021). Depression, anxiety, and happiness in dog owners and potential dog owners during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. *PLOS ONE*, 16(12), e0260676.
09. Mubanga, M., Byberg, L., Egenvall, A., Ingelsson, E., & Fall, T. (2019). Dog Ownership and Survival After a Major Cardiovascular Event: A Register-Based Prospective Study. *Circulation: Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes*, 12(10), e005342.
10. Mubanga, M., Byberg, L., Egenvall, A., Ingelsson, E., & Fall, T. (2019). Dog Ownership and Survival After a Major Cardiovascular Event: A Register-Based Prospective Study. *Circulation: Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes*, 12(10), e005342.
11. Saunders, J., Parast, L., Babey, S. H., & Miles, J. V. (2017). Exploring the differences between pet and non-pet owners: Implications for human-animal interaction research and policy. *PLOS ONE*, 12(6), e0179494.
12. The Power of Pets | NIH News in Health. (n.d.). Retrieved April 6, 2022, from

13. Villafaina-Domínguez, B., Collado-Mateo, D., Merellano-Navarro, E., & Villafaina, S. (2020). Effects of Dog-Based Animal-Assisted Interventions in Prison Population: A Systematic Review. *Animals*, 10(11), 2129.
14. Westgarth, C., Christley, R. M., Jewell, C., German, A. J., Boddy, L. M., & Christian, H. E. (2019). Dog owners are more likely to meet physical activity guidelines than people without a dog: An investigation of the association between dog ownership and physical activity levels in a UK community. *Scientific Reports*, 9(1), 5704.
15. The Humane Society of the United States. "Stopping Puppy Mills." Accessed March 28, 2023.