



DR. KELLY'S
MOBILE SURGICAL UNIT

FIVE WAYS

Owning a Pet
Supports Your
Mental &
Physical Health

Five Ways Owning a Pet Supports Your Mental & Physical Health



If you have ever owned a dog, cat or small pet, you may already appreciate the joy and affection they bring to your life. But, were you aware that your pets can actually make a positive impact on your health? The science is starting to catch up, and show all the ways in which having a pet can reduce stress, anxiety, depression, ease loneliness, encourage exercise, and improve your cardiovascular health. Owning and caring for a pet can actually reduce allergies seen in children, and teach them valuable life skills. Additionally, pets provide devoted companionship for older adults and can even offer a boost to their brain health.

In this free downloadable from Dr. Kelly's Mobile Surgical Unit, we will explore the ways your pet helps support your mental and physical well-being. Whether you have a dog, cat, rabbit, or even a fish, the documented benefits of pet ownership and the link to better health are intriguing. In a recent study, heart attack patients with pets were shown to live longer than those patients without pets. Interestingly, Alzheimer's patients tend to eat more of their meals if their fish tank is on the dining table or in their line of sight.

Many studies have also pointed out that pets increase our oxytocin and serotonin levels, the feel-good chemicals in our brains. Just think about the last time you played with your dog - Did you feel happy and relaxed after this experience? It is very likely that you did.

Below, we will dig a little deeper and explain just how pets enrich our lives and overall well-being:

Health Boost #1:

Pets help pet owners cope with anxiety, depression and stress

One of the most rewarding aspects of owning a pet, especially a dog, is the loyal companionship that they provide. If you are already a dog owner, you are familiar with these benefits. The playfulness, endless licks and the puppy eyes you receive when you leave your home without them. Dogs are as loyal as they come, and they help their owners feel loved, connected and less lonely. This is especially true for the elderly, those with chronic illness or people who live alone.

As we all know, feeling connected and staying social is an important part of health and wellness. And pets can fill the gap for many people. Elderly folks, children on the autism spectrum, the chronically ill, and even busy professionals can all benefit from having a pet, whether it's a dog, cat, rabbit, guinea pig or fish. For children and the elderly, pets can help offer a sense of purpose, which helps boost self-esteem. Pet owners who have chronic pain or illness tend to suffer less from depression and isolation when they have a pet, especially a dog.

Petting, hugging or touching a loving animal can quickly calm and soothe you when you are feeling stressed out or anxious. And owning a dog offers a great opportunity to get healthy exercise in the form of walks, jogging, or going to the park. Activities like walking your dog get you outside connect you with social interaction, fresh air and exercise. All of these can really boost your mood for those who deal with high levels of stress, anxiety or depression.

Pets, cats and dogs especially, have evolved to become attuned to the behavior and emotions of humans. Dogs, for instance, are able to understand some of the words we use, but they really shine as interpreting our tone of voice, body language and gestures. Like any good friend, your dog regularly checks in by looking into your eyes to gauge your emotional state. They use this to not only see how their human is doing, but also to determine when their next walk or treat may be on its way, of course.

Seeking a quick pick-me-up? Volunteer at your local animal shelter. The shelter pups will appreciate you stopping by and you will enjoy a rewarding boost to your mood.

Five Ways Owning a Pet Supports Your Mental & Physical Health

Recent studies have shown that:

- Pet owners are less likely to suffer from depression than those without pets.
- Pet owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels (indicators of heart disease) than those without pets.
- Playing with a dog or cat can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine, which calm and relax.
- Pet owners over age 65 make 30% fewer visits to their doctors than those without pets.



Health Boost #2:

Owning a pet can actually improve your brain health

For the elderly, those with dementia or other neurological disorders, owning a pet can offer a beneficial boost to their brain health. In the case of Alzheimer's, as a part of the disease many patients tend to exhibit a variety of behavioral problems including difficulty coping with stress. A pet can offer patients a sense of companionship, reduce circulating stress hormones, and even help improve their behavior.

A few recent studies have shown 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 gentle touch from a docile animal can help soothe an Alzheimer's patient and decrease aggressive behavior.
- Pets can help ease caregiver stress, and therefore improve patient's problem behavior. Cats or small pets may be a better option as they require less care than dogs.

Additionally, pet ownership can play an important role in healthy aging by helping individuals:

Stay connected. As people age, maintaining a social network becomes more difficult. Retirement, illness, death and relocation can take away close friends and family members. Pets, especially dogs, are a great way for older adults to connect, and meet new people.

Boost energy levels. Aging comes with slowing down in many ways, however you can improve and overcome the challenges associated with aging by exercising, eating balanced meals, and practicing self-care. Dogs and cats encourage playfulness, laughter and exercise. These help boost your immune system and even your energy levels.

Find a sense of purpose. Over time, elderly folks may retire from their careers and their children may move far away. Many of the things that occupied time and gave purpose will change. Pets can bring joy, and help boost morale, optimism and sense of self-worth.

Health Boost #3:

Pet owners (and their children) tend to have more immunity to allergies and asthma.

Pets, especially cats and dogs, can help support a healthy immune system. Recent studies are showing that animals, especially cats in the home, can help you and your kids develop immunity to common allergies and asthma. Additionally, babies raised in families with pets may be less likely to get colds and ear infections during their first year than babies that live in pet-free homes. This is great news for parents. Parents can rest easy when their dog or cat wants to snuggle up with the children - there are health and wellness benefits for everyone.

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.

- Unlike parents, pets are not critical and do not give orders. They are always loving and their presence at home can help provide a sense of security in children. This sense of calm can help ease separation anxiety in children when parents are not around. .
- Having the love and companionship of a pet can make a child build self-esteem 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.

Children and adults can benefit from playing with pets, which can provide a source of calm and relaxation, and a source of stimulation for the brain and body. Playing with a pet can even be an educational experience 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 persistence.

Health Boost #4:

Pets encourage you to make healthy lifestyle changes

When was the last time you took a walk with your dog? Most dogs need to be walked at least once per day, if not more. One of the best aspects of owning a dog is that they encourage you to move around and stay active. Dog owners on average walk 22 minutes more than people who do not own dogs. That is close to the 30 minute daily exercise requirement recommended by the American Heart

Association and the Mayo Clinic. Of course, each pet is different and some don't require much exercise (for example, your cat or pet fish). But if you own even a smaller dog, you will still reap the benefits of their daily walk.



For pet owners with more athletic pups, you can really enjoy a wide range of outdoor activities with your dog. Some people enjoy jogging, biking, hiking and even rollerblading with their dog. It's best to find an activity that you both enjoy. You will also want to train a few commands for your safety and theirs. Whichever activity you select, you can feel confident that you and your pup are getting the benefits of regular exercise.

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:

Boosting 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.

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 a live animal can help make you feel needed, and take the focus away from your daily concerns, especially if you live alone.

Helping you meet new people. Pets can give a helpful social boost to their owners, helping them start and maintain new friendships. Dog owners frequently stop and talk to each other on walks, hikes, or in a dog park.

Reducing anxiety. The companionship of an animal can offer comfort, help ease anxiety, and build self-confidence for people who suffer from anxiety.

Health Boost #5:

Pet owners tend to have better heart health than non-pet owners.

By now, it may not surprise you to learn that pet owners tend to have better heart health than non-pet owners. We have already gone over quite a few of the health and mental benefits of owning a pet. But good heart health is another one. In recent years, the American Heart Association (AHA) weighed the recent studies on whether or not having a dog supports good heart health. The verdict? The AHA now links dog ownership with greater longevity and reduced heart disease for a few reasons.

Did you know that having pets actually reduces your stress levels? Hard to imagine if you happen to have a stir-crazy puppy, especially when they steal a roll of toilet paper or chew up your favorite shoes. Puppy antics aside, science now shows that your dog, cat or small pet actually reduces your stress hormone levels. Pet owners also tend to have lower resting heart rates than non-pet owners. Think about the last time you spent playing fetch with your dog, fed your guinea pig or cuddled your cat. You may have felt calmer, more relaxed during, and even for a while after. Studies have proven that pet owners get a reduction in stress levels, blood pressure and even cholesterol labs. And your furry companion gets a stress-reduction boost too when you play with or pet them! It's a win-win for pets and pet owners. So consider spending that extra time to play with, walk or cuddle your pet each day.

For one, the emotional benefits of having an affectionate pet, which can reduce blood pressure and stress levels. Also, dog owners are more likely to exercise, as a result have better cholesterol, low blood pressure, be less vulnerable to stress and more likely to survive a heart attack. These are incredible health benefits. And all go along with owning, at least in these studies, a dog.

Cat owners can still enjoy the benefits of reduced stress and high blood pressure, but dog owners seem to really benefit when it comes to heart health. So next time you go on a walk, snuggle or play tug-of-war with your pup, you will know that you are doing something beneficial for your heart health too.

Owning a pet is a **serious commitment**

Keep in mind, a pet is not a miracle cure for physical or mental illness. In most cases, a pet is beneficial and comforting only for individuals who love domestic animals and have the resources to keep their pet happy and healthy. If you are simply not an “animal person”, pet ownership is not likely to offer health or mental benefits or improve your life.

Even if you do love domestic animals, it is essential to understand everything that caring for a pet involves. Owning a pet is a serious commitment that will last the animal’s lifetime, 10 to 15 years in the case of dogs. Pets cost time, money and require daily care. If you do not have the resources or stamina to own a pet full-time, there are some ways you can still experience the benefits. For instance, pet sitting, volunteering at an animal shelter or even visiting friends who own pets can help you experience the health and mental benefits of being around animals. Even short periods spent with a dog or cat can benefit both you and the animal. If you do choose to get a dog or cat, be sure to check your local animal rescue and Humane Society to find your fur-ever companion.

Premium, Affordable Healthcare for Your Best Friend

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