Pets & Health,
Good Medicine for Body & Mind

Pet owners know that a family pet can make life happier. Now, medical science is finding that pet owners lead longer, healthier lives.

In fact, growing research shows that having an animal improves our emotional and physical health. This is especially true of cat and dog companions. These studies have connected pet ownership with favorable health effects. These range from lower blood pressure to reduced anxiety levels.

OWNING A PET CAN HAVE REAL PHYSICAL BENEFITS FOR THEIR OWNERS

- **Pet owners have lower blood pressure**. It has long been known that the act of stroking a pet can reduce blood pressure. But a study at the State University of New York at Buffalo found that the positive effects continue even when the pet is not present. The study looked at a group of stockbrokers with high blood pressure (*hypertension*). It found that just owning a pet can help lower blood pressure. Also, the blood pressure will stay lower, even in stressful settings.
- **Pet owners have lower blood cholesterol levels**. Australia's Baker Medical Research Institute found that pet owners had lower blood pressure, too. They also had lower levels of blood cholesterol and triglycerides than non-pet owners. This reduces the risk of heart disease.
- **Pet owners have a higher survival rate after serious illness**. Two studies have found that heart attack patients who owned pets were much more likely to be alive a year after they were discharged from the hospital than those who did not. What's more, a study at City Hospital in New York found that having a pet affected survival rate even more than having a spouse or friends. Patients in hospitals or nursing homes who have regular visits from their pets have shown to be more receptive to treatment. The need to care for their pet gives them reason to recover and the will to live.
- **Pet owners have fewer doctors' visits**. Studies at Cambridge University and at UC LA have found that pet ownership corresponds to overall improved health and fewer medical care visits. A study of Medicare patients also found that seniors who own dogs go to the doctor less than those who do not. Even the most highly stressed older dog owners in the study had 21 % fewer physician's visits than non-dog owners. And, an Australian study of 6,000 households found that dog and cat owners required less medication for blood pressure, cholesterol, sleeping difficulties or heart problems.
- **Pet owners have psychological benefits.** Pets offer unconditional love and attention. They make us laugh, help us relax and divert us from day-to-day concerns. Research has shown these benefits.
- **Pet ownership reduces loneliness**. People who live alone find that having pets reduces feelings of loneliness. According to researchers, this is because the pet provides companionship. Pets also become a topic for conservation with other people. That increases social interactions. Pet therapy programs at nursing homes are credited with enabling patients to reach out beyond their own pain and isolation. They start caring about the world around them again.
- **Pet ownership fights depression**. A study of AIDS patients conducted by UCLA, in 1999 found that pets provide a level of companionship that helped patients cope with the stress of their illness. The study looked at more than 1,800 patients. It found that those who did not have a pet were more than twice as likely to report problems (*symptoms*) of depression. Scientists in South Africa have conducted research showing that a pet can serve as an anti-depressant. It increases the release of endorphins and other hormones tied to pleasure.

- **Pet ownership helps us cope with stress**. A study of breast cancer patients done at the University of Warwick found that pets can provide valuable support for women coping with cancer. Researchers found pets provided a relationship that was unaffected by the presence of a serious illness. The ASPCA is now studying the value of the human-animal bond during times of tragedy. It is investigating how family pets impacted people's lives during and after the events of September 11, 2001.
- **Pet ownership aids childhood development**. Studies have linked family ownership of a pet with high self-esteem in young children and greater cognitive development. Also, children with pets score higher on empathy and pro-social scales than non-pet owners.
- **Pet owners have enhanced family life**. Psychological studies have found that most pet owners think their pets improve the quality of family life. They reduce tension between family members. Pets enhance their owners' compassion for living things. One survey found that pets were of great importance during personal or family illness, death of friends and family members or a family crisis.

For more information, visit the Delta Society's website at www.deltasociety.org.

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