

Healthy Reasons to Have a Pet

- Pet owners have better physical health due to exercise with their pets. (Serpel, 1990). Improved health through daily exercise is one of the main benefits of regular walks with your dog. Studies have also shown that people walking a dog have far more positive encounters than those walking alone do. A study at Cambridge University found that owning a pet produced improvements in general health in as little as one month. This continued over the 10 month study(1) . Pet owners were found to suffer fewer ailments, such as headaches, colds and hayfever.
- Having a pet may decrease heart attack mortality by 3%. This translates into 30,000 lives saved annually in the US alone (Friedman, 1980). Research has shown that pet ownership is better than drugs for reducing high blood pressure, making dog owners more likely to survive after a heart attack than people without pets.
- Dogs are preventive and therapeutic measures against everyday stress (Allen, 1991).
- Pets decrease feeling of loneliness and isolation (Kidd, 1994). Pet owners have lower blood pressure. (Friedmann, 1983, Anderson 1992).
- Pet owners have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels than non-owners (Anderson, 1992). One study showed that keeping a pet significantly reduced levels of cholesterol and blood triglyceride (two factors believed to influence the disease). These effects could not be explained by differences in diet, smoking or socio-economic group(2). This fact, combined with the reduction in blood pressure from being with a pet, may make pet owners less prone to heart attacks than non pet-owners.
- ACE inhibitors lower resting blood pressure but they do not diminish reactivity to mental stress. Pet ownership can lessen cardiovascular reactivity to psychological stress among hypertensive patients treated with a daily dose of Lisinopril. (Allen, 1999).
- Animal-assisted therapy can effectively reduce the loneliness of residents in long-term care facilities. (Banks, 2002).
- People with borderline hypertension had lower blood pressure on days they took their dogs to work. (Allen, K. 2001). Scientific study has shown that the reduction in blood pressure achieved through dog ownership can be equal to the reduction achieved by changing to a low salt diet or cutting down on alcohol.
- Seniors who own dogs go to the doctor less than those who do not. In a study of 100 Medicare patients, even the most highly stressed dog owners in the study has 21 percent fewer physician's contacts than non-dog owners. (Siegel, 1990).
- Activities of daily living (ADL) level of seniors who did not currently own pets deteriorated more on average than that of respondents who currently owned pets. (Raina, 1999).
- Seniors who own pets coped better with stress life events without entering the healthcare system. (Raina, 1998).
- Companionship of pets (particularly dogs) helps children in families adjust better to the serious illness and death of a parent (Raveis, 1993).
- Pet owners feel less afraid of being a victim of crime when walking with a dog or sharing a residence with a dog. (Serpel, 1990). Pets have been described as a social lubricant. Attending dog training classes, visiting the vet and walking in the park all provide opportunities to meet and talk to other people. Studies have shown that people walking a dog have far more positive encounters with others than those out walking alone, with the pet often providing a topic of conversation
- Pet owners have fewer minor health problems (Friedmann, 1990, Serpel, 1990).
- Pet owners have better psychological well-being (Serpel, 1990). Pets can lessen the feelings of isolation and loneliness and provide a sense of purpose elderly people. Having to make the effort to care for a pet on a regular basis provides a feeling of fulfillment.
- Contact with pets develops nurturing behavior in children who may grow to be more nurturing adults (Melson, 1990).
- Pet owners have a higher on-year survival rates following coronary heart disease (Friedman, 1980, 1995).
- Medication costs dropped from an average of \$3.80 per patient per day to just \$1.18 per patient per day in new nursing home facilities in New York, Missouri and Texas that have animals and plants as an integral part of the environment. (Montague, 1995).
- Pets in nursing homes increase social and verbal interactions adjunct to other therapy. (Fick, 1992).
- Children exposed to humane education programs display enhanced empathy for humans compared with children not exposed to such programs. (Ascione, 1992).
- Positive self-esteem of children is enhanced by owning a pet. (Bergensen, 1989). The non-judgemental companionship and unconditional love offered by pets is known to have considerable mental health benefits for owners including increased self-esteem

- Children's cognitive development can be enhanced by owning a pet. (Poresky, 1988). Pets can help people learn about the continuity of life—birth, death, loss and grief—and offer a sense of intimacy. They are even a way to help couples prepare to have children, he adds.
- 70% of families surveyed reported an increase in family happiness and fun subsequent to pet acquisition. (Cain, 1985).
- The presence of a dog during a child's physical examination decreases their stress. (Nadgengast, 1997, Baun, 1998).
- Children owning pets are more involved in activities such as sports, hobbies, clubs or chores. (Melson, 1990).
- Children exposed to pets during the first year of life have a lower frequency of allergic rhinitis and asthma. (Hesselmar, 1999).
- Children with autism have more prosocial behaviors less autistic behaviors such as self-absorption. (Redefer, 1989). Owning a pet can teach a child about the responsibilities of life and mutual trust. By feeding and exercising a pet, children can also develop an understanding of daily care.
- Children who own pets score significantly higher on empathy and prosocial orientation scales than non-owners. (Vidovic, 1999).
- Children with learning difficulties can also benefit from interaction with pets. One study found that the presence of a dog helped to channel the children's attention and responsiveness towards the therapist's suggestion - in effect, the dog helped increase the attention span of the children.
- Pets fulfill many of the same support functions as humans for adults and children. (Melson, 1998).
- People who have AIDS that have pets have less depression and reduced stress. Pets are a major source of support and increase perception the ability to cope. (Siegel, 1999, Carmack, 1991).

References

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CANCER RESEARCH:

Pedigreed pooches aren't just for show anymore. As this ScienCentral & News video reports, biomedical researchers say dog genealogy is making a new contribution to human health. Sometimes it's hard to believe that the tiny Chihuahua and the bulky Mastiff are members of the same species. But there's more to dog's differences than meets the eye. Now genetics researchers can identify a dog's breed through its DNA. This genetics-based classification system for breeds will allow researchers to piece together the evolutionary history of our furry pals, as well as study their genes for information about diseases that we also get. The different breeds of dogs have very different physical appearances, very different sizes, and very different behavior patterns, says Elaine Ostrander, professor of genome sciences and zoology at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, who published the research in the journal Science. So if you think about very small breeds of dogs, like the Pekinese, if you think about very large breeds of dogs, like the Great Dane there is an amazing amount of genetics that must account for those differences between those very large dogs and between those very small dogs. And we were interested in finding some of the genes that were responsible for differences in appearance in size, in shape or morphology, as well behavior between different dogs. Dog DNA is collected with a swab. Ostrander and her team sampled cheek cells from 414 different dogs from 85 different dog breeds, and found that each breed had a distinct genetic signature that could be used to match 99 percent of the dogs with their correct breed. The researchers used their data to construct an evolutionary tree showing which breeds were most closely related. The tree included one ancient group and three relatively recent ones. The oldest group includes dogs from Asia like the chow, and from Africa like the basenji. These dogs are also the most genetically similar to wolves. The breeds outside this group didn't show up until the around the 1800s. The dogs in these three groups correspond to the type of work they were bred for the border collie, from the herding group, is known for its agility, stamina, tenacity, and intelligence and many share behavioral traits as well as physical ones.

One difference among breeds is that certain breeds tend to get certain forms of cancer and other diseases. In a study published last year in the journal *Human Molecular Genetics*, Ostrander and her team identified a single gene that causes an inherited form of kidney cancer in German shepherd dogs by studying a closely related group of dogs. The same gene in humans may cause human kidney cancer, showing that dog breeds could point out human disease genes.

The genome sequence of the dog and the genome sequence of humans differ by less than one or two percent, Ostrander points out. This really looks like it's going to work. It's really going to be true the genes that we are going to find in dogs are really going to be important for human health and biology. This research appeared in the April 21, 2004 issue of *Science* and was funded by a Burroughs Wellcome Innovation Award, the AKC-Canine Health Foundation, the Waltham Foundation and the National Institutes of Health.