

Pets can be a prescription for happier, healthier life

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

We include them in our family portraits, make room for them on our beds, tell them our deepest secrets and miss work when they're sick. And whether they paw, fly or swim their way into our hearts, pets are an important part of our lives.



America is a nation of animal lovers. According to the National Pet Owners Survey, about two-thirds of U.S. households own at least one pet, which means 71 million homes provide shelter for at least one furry, feathery or scaly critter. We take good care of our pets, but did you know that our pets also take good care of us? A growing body of research suggests that owning and interacting with a pet can improve our health.

Besides loving you unconditionally, studies show that those wagging, purring or hopping bundles of love can reduce your stress levels, tame your blood pressure, curb your depression, reduce feelings of loneliness, keep you physically fit and even help you live longer. Some studies suggest that children who are exposed to

furry pets as infants are less likely to develop allergies.

"There are lots of studies showing that pets are good for our health," says Rebecca Johnson, PhD, RN, director of the Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction at the University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine.

Enjoying pawstitive energy

Researchers are busy studying the many ways our pets can benefit our health. Several large studies suggest that Fluffy and Fido — in addition to winning your heart — can improve the way your heart works. A National Institutes of Health study of 420 adults who had suffered heart attacks showed that pooch owners were significantly more likely to still be kicking — and their tickers still ticking — one year later than were poochless patients, regardless of how serious the heart attack. In another study of 240 married couples, those who owned pets had lower heart rates and blood pressure, both at rest as well as under stress.



Your best bud can also improve your circulation. A study involving cat owners found they have fewer strokes than their feline-free counterparts.

"The reduction in blood pressure through interaction with a companion animal has been shown in many studies," Johnson says. "It's practically the oldest finding we have."

The "relaxation response" has even been shown when people kick back and watch their fish swim, Johnson says.

Happy tails

At the end of a long day, who doesn't enjoy coming home to a cold nose, a wagging tail and a slobbery kiss? But is it okay to kiss our pets?

It's not a good idea to let your pets lick you on the mouth, says Jennifer Wright, DVM, MPH, a veterinary epidemiologist at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. If you want to kiss your dog or cat, the top of her or his head is the preferred place to plant kisses.

"The rewards you get from your pets



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are much greater than the risk of acquiring an illness from a well-cared for pet," Wright says.

Just like people, our pets can carry certain bacteria, viruses, parasites and fungi, so get into the habit of washing your hands after interacting with your pets. This is especially important for children and for people with compromised immune systems.

If you have a child younger than five, don't bring turtles, amphibians such as frogs, or baby chicks into your home. Small kids can't resist picking up these cute critters, but there's a downside: They shed salmonella bacteria, which can cause serious illness, especially in small children, elderly people and folks with chronic conditions.

Pet-to-person infections can occur if you are bitten or scratched by an infected animal, or have contact with an infected pet's waste or saliva. Cats and dogs can carry bacterial infections in their intestinal tracts, and parasites can be present in their waste. If you have small children, make sure the cat's litter box is not accessible to them. Kids will put anything in their mouths, so you don't want them in your cat's toilet.

Keeping up with your pet's vaccinations will help keep your pet healthy and reduce the risk of someone in your family contracting an animalborne infection.

"There are benefits to having pets, you just have to be aware that there are some risks and they are all perfectly preventable risks," Wright says.



Parade your pooch

In terms of getting you off the couch and out the door, dogs have the edge.

"You're not going to walk a snake," Johnson says. "Dogs will facilitate physical exercise better than cats or other nonwalking pets."

Studies show that dog owners who regularly walk their hounds lose pounds and are more physically active overall than those who don't own or walk a dog. In addition to getting you outdoors — rain or shine — your pooch provides "social lubrication," she says.

In other words, when you're out walking Max, people are more likely to strike up conversations with you. And some research shows that neighborhoods where people walk dogs regularly are viewed as friendlier and safer.



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