Physical & Medical Health Benefits of Pets

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff

Although many pet owners will say their pets make them feel better, there are still some skeptics. Now, research studies have shown that pets do have a very positive impact on various aspects of our health.

Increase longevity after heart attacks

Dog ownership increases the odds for survival in persons who have had a heart attack from 1 in 87 to 1 in 15. Pet ownership also has increased the percent of people who survived at least one year after hospitalization for heart problems. Only 6% of nonpet owners survived versus 28% of people with pets. Pet ownership may be only one of several variables that influenced this improved survival, but even a 2-3% difference is significant. In addition, pets may actually lessen the risk of heart attacks.

Lower cholesterol and triglycerides

People with pets have been found to have lower cholesterol and triglyceride levels when compared to people who did not have pets, even when matched for weight, diet, and smoking habits.

Decrease blood pressure and reduce stress

Dogs have been shown to reduce blood pressure in a number of populations. Studies in women undergoing stress tests, have demonstrated that the presence of a dog had more of an effect on lowering blood pressure than the presence of friends. Similarly, children who had a dog present during their physical examination showed lower heart rate, blood pressure, and behavioral distress than when the dog was not present.

Stockbrokers who had dogs or cats in their offices when they had to carry out stressful tasks had smaller increases in blood pressure than those who did not have a pet present.

Increase physical activity and functioning

People who own pets often have better physical health due to the need to exercise and care for their pets.

Reduce medical appointments and minor health problems

The use of prescription drugs and the overall cost of caring for patients in nursing homes dropped in those facilities where companion animals became part of the therapy. A study also found that for persons living at home, those with pets had fewer medical appointments and minor health problems.

Predict seizures

Some people who have periodic seizures have reported that their dogs can sense the onset of a seizure before they can. Now it has been found that dogs can be specially trained to recognize some type of change prior to a seizure, and signal the owner of the imminent seizure. This gives the owner sufficient time to prepare, such as moving away from a hot stove. These dogs are called 'seizure-alert' or 'seizure-response' dogs, and can be trained to signal their owners from 15 to 45 minutes prior to a seizure.

Control 'freezing' in Parkinson's Disease

In addition to the tremors and stiffness that Parkinson's patients experience, they also face a problem called 'freezing.' Their feet freeze in place while the rest of their body keeps moving, causing the person to fall. As a result, some people with Parkinson's may tend to become sedentary, reluctant to move, and reclusive.

Parkinson's helper dogs have been trained to identify when a person with Parkinson's is 'freezing.' If the dog touches the person's foot, it breaks the freeze and the person can continue walking. Medical experts really do not know how or why this works. In addition to breaking the 'freeze,' the dogs are taught to prevent their partners from falling by counterbalancing and helping them regain their footing. If the person would fall, the dog can help the person up.

Diagnose cancer

It may sound stranger than fiction, but a dog in Florida, named George, has been reported to be able to detect a particular smell given off by certain skin tumors called malignant melanomas. George can sniff out this cancer with close to 100%

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*

accuracy. Researchers at Cambridge University are studying the use of dogs to detect the smell of prostate cancer in urine from human males.

Alert to hypoglycemia

There are also animals who alert their owners to episodes of hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), which allows the owner to correct the level before serious symptoms develop.

*Unauthorized use of any images, thumbnails, illustrations, descriptions, article content, or registered trademarks of **Foster & Smith, Inc.** is strictly prohibited under copyright law. Site content, including photography, descriptions, pricing, promotions, and availability are subject to change without notice. These restrictions are necessary in order to protect not only our copyrighted intellectual property, but also the health of pets, since articles or images that are altered or edited after download could result in misinformation that may harm companion animals, aquatic life, or native species.*