

CAN PETS HELP YOU LIVE LONGER?

Top Science Supporting Pets for Longer Life from the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI)

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Pet Owners Live Longer

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United Statesⁱ. Several studies have demonstrated an association between pet ownership and a lower risk of cardiovascular diseases and heart-related health issuesⁱⁱ. Dog ownership has been associated with a lower incidence of cardiovascular disease and a reduced risk of mortality. Specifically, in a prospective study including 3.4 million individuals with 12 years of follow-up, dog ownership was associated with a lower risk of incident cardiovascular disease in single-person households and lower mortality in the general population.ⁱⁱⁱ In a systematic review of ten studies yielding data from 3.8 million participants, dog ownership was associated with a 24% risk reduction for all-cause mortality as compared to non-owners, with six studies demonstrating a significant reduction in the risk of death^{iv}.



2

Pets Facilitate Healing & Resiliency Against Cardiovascular Disease

Pet ownership has been linked to increased coronary artery disease survival^v. In a study of individuals with one or more cardiac risk factors, pet ownership was associated with greater adaptability to disturbances in the cardiovascular system^{vi}. A study of 2,400 cat owners concluded there was a significantly lower relative risk for death due to cardiovascular diseases, including stroke and heart attack, compared to non-owners during a 20-year follow-up^{vii}. A recently published study compared the health outcomes of dog owners and non-owners after a heart attack or stroke using health data provided by the Swedish National Patient Register. The risk of death for dog-owning heart attack patients living alone after hospitalization was 33% lower and 27% lower following a stroke, compared to non-dog owners. The researchers found evidence of an association of dog ownership with a better outcome after a major cardiovascular event^{viii}. Having a pet may also facilitate rehabilitation. After a 12-week cardiac rehabilitation program, pet owners were significantly more likely (96.5%) to complete cardiac rehabilitation compared with non-owners (79.2%)^{ix}.



3

Pet Ownership Increases Physical Activity and Reduces Obesity

Walking is a well-established physical activity that improves health by helping people maintain a healthy weight, prevent or manage various conditions including heart disease and diabetes, and improves mood, balance and coordination^x. Research has shown that pet owners, particularly dog owners, are more likely to meet the recommended amount of physical activity through walking. Results of one study found that compared with non-dog owners, the odds of obtaining at least 150 minutes per week of total walking were 34% higher for dog walkers, and the odds of doing any physical activity were 69% higher^{xi}. After researchers adjusted analyses for sociodemographic, neighborhood, social environmental, and intrapersonal factors, the odds of achieving "sufficient physical activity," "sufficient walking," and "sufficient walking for recreation in the neighborhood" remained 57% to 77% higher among dog owners compared with non-owners^{xii}. Dog walking is also associated with a lower incidence of obesity and weight loss. A study of 2,199 subjects noted significantly fewer obese dog walkers (17%) compared to both owners who did not walk their dogs (28%) and non-owners (22%)^{xiii}. The Walk a Hound, Lose a Pound study found that older adult dog-walkers who walked up to 20 minutes per day 5 days per week lost an average of 14 pounds during a one-year program - a better result than most nationally known weight-loss plans^{xiv}.



4

Pets Reduce Stress Levels

While the relationship between stress and illness is complex, emotional stress is a major contributing factor to the leading causes of death in the United States including cancer, coronary heart disease and suicide^{xv}. Research supports interacting with one's own pet for reduced stress and lower responses to stress. In a review of 69 studies focused on the impact of pets on their owners, stress reduction was a major commonality. The review reported that most studies show that the presence of pets or friendly animals can effectively reduce heart rate and blood pressure, or buffer increases in these parameters in anticipation of a stressor^{xvi}.



5

Pet Owners are More Socially Connected

More than one-third of Americans older than 65 and half of those over 85 live alone. Loneliness can be as deadly as smoking 15 cigarettes per day^{xvii}, making it a serious threat to public health. Research shows that social relationships – both quantity and quality – profoundly affect mental and physical health. A study involving people in Australia and the United States found that pet owners were more likely to get to know people in their neighborhood than non-pet owners. Results indicated that companion animals can be a catalyst for several dimensions of human social relationships, ranging from social interaction and getting to know people, to forming new friendships^{xviii}. In older adults, the role of pet ownership may provide a sense of purpose and meaning, reducing loneliness and increasing socialization. These benefits may also increase resilience in older adults against mental health disorders, which may positively influence their mental health outcomes^{xix}.



For Non-Pet Owners

For those who may not be able to own or live with a pet, there's good news! They can still experience the benefits of the human-animal bond. Research shows that interventions like animal-assisted therapy (AAT) or animal-assisted activities (AAA) can aid in the recovery process and help alleviate stress, enhance social interaction and improve quality of life. For example, a study of older adults with mental illness living in long-term care facilities concluded that AAT reduced depressive symptoms and improved cognitive function. Self-perceived quality of life was also greatly improved^{xx}. AAT has also been shown to reduce feelings of loneliness among older adults in long-term care facilities^{xxi}.

For more information about the health benefits of pets, visit www.habri.org