

DAY IN DAY OUT

WELCOA'S ONLINE BULLETIN FOR YOUR LIFESTYLE

THE HEALTH PERKS OF PETS

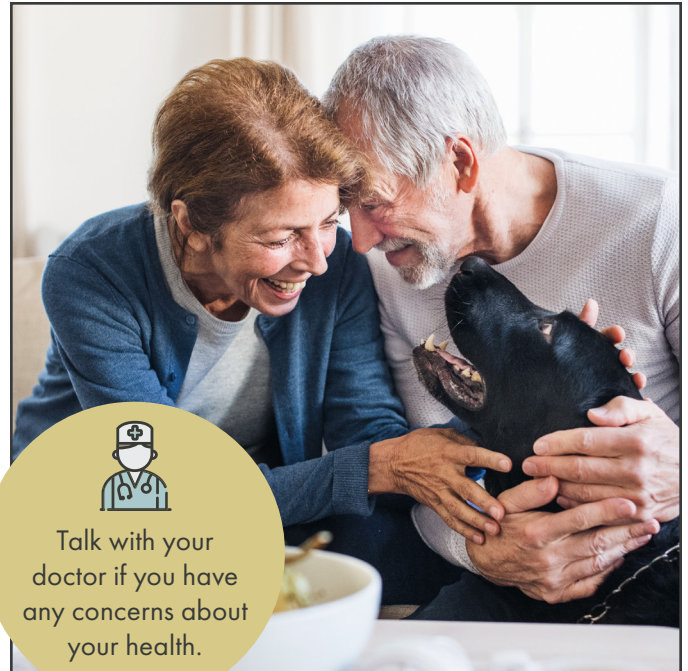
Sixty-seven percent of U.S. households, or about 85 million families, own a pet, according to the 2019-2020 National Pet Owners Survey conducted by the American Pet Products Association. And there's a good reason why so many of us have a furry friend. The joy of coming home to a loyal companion and the unconditional love of a pet are just a few of the upsides of pet ownership. Perhaps some of the biggest benefits of having pets correlates to our health. Owning a pet may decrease stress, improve heart health, and even help children with their emotional and social skills.

Interacting with animals has been shown to decrease levels of cortisol (a stress-related hormone) and lower blood pressure. Other studies have found that animals can reduce loneliness, increase feelings of social support, and boost your mood.

Experts point out that there isn't just one answer as to how a pet can help someone with a specific condition. Some dog owners may benefit from increased physical activity because they have to walk a dog several times a day. Some people may experience calmness and reduced stress from cuddling with their cat. There's no one universal benefit or one-type-fits-all when it comes to pets.

HOW ANIMALS CAN ENRICH OUR LIVES

There's been a lot of study and research done on the impacts pets can have on our lives. One study has found that dogs may aid in the classroom. The study found that dogs can help children with ADHD focus their attention. Researchers enrolled two groups of children



Talk with your doctor if you have any concerns about your health.

diagnosed with ADHD into 12-week group therapy sessions. The first group of kids read to a therapy dog once a week for 30 minutes. The second group read to puppets that looked like dogs. Kids who read to the real animals showed better social skills and more sharing, cooperation, and volunteering. They also had fewer behavioral problems.

Another study has found that children with autism spectrum disorder were calmer while playing with guinea pigs in the classroom. When the children spent 10 minutes in a supervised group playtime with guinea pigs, their anxiety levels dropped. The children also had better social interactions and were more engaged with their peers. The researchers suggest that the animals offered unconditional acceptance, making them a calm comfort to the children.

Animals may help you in other unexpected ways. A recent study showed that caring for fish helped teens with diabetes better manage their disease. Researchers

had a group of teens with type 1 diabetes care for a pet fish twice a day by feeding and checking water levels. The caretaking routine also included changing the tank water each week. This was paired with the children reviewing their blood glucose (blood sugar) logs with parents.

Researchers tracked how consistently these teens checked their blood glucose. Compared with teens who weren't given a fish to care for, fish-keeping teens were more disciplined about checking their own blood glucose levels, which is essential for maintaining their health.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF PET OWNERSHIP

While pets may bring a wide range of health benefits, an animal may not work for everyone. Recent studies suggest that early exposure to pets may help protect young children from developing allergies and asthma. But for people who are allergic to certain animals, having pets in the home can do more harm than good.

Pets also bring new responsibilities. Knowing how to care for and feed an animal is part of owning a pet. Remember that animals can feel stressed and fatigued, too. It's important for kids to be able to recognize signs of stress in their pet and know when not to approach. Animal bites can cause serious harm.

Researchers will continue to explore the many health effects of having a pet. They are trying to find out what's working, what's not working, and what's safe—for both the humans and the animals.

