

# How Pets Can Enhance Your Health

by Tracy Martinez, RN, BSN, CBN



A pet is certainly a treasured friend. Dogs have been called man's (and woman's) best friend for decades. But, did you know that owning a pet can have a beneficial impact on physical, social and psychological health? In fact, for nearly 25 years, research has shown that living with pets provide certain health benefits.

## Benefits of Owning a Pet

Pets can help lower blood pressure, lessen anxiety and boost your immune system. In one study, stockbrokers with high blood pressure who adopted a cat or dog had lower blood pressure readings in stressful situations than those without pets. People in stress mode get into a state of "dis-ease" in which harmful chemicals like cortisol and norepinephrine negatively affect the immune system.

Like any enjoyable activity, playing with a dog can elevate serotonin and dopamine – nerve transmitters that are known to have pleasurable and calming properties. Heart attack patients who have pets survive longer than those without pets. Male pet owners have less sign of heart disease – lower triglycerides and cholesterol levels than non pet owners, researchers report.<sup>1</sup>

There are emotional benefits of owning a dog. Coming home to a dog eliminates frustration, loneliness and can build self-esteem. You are wanted, needed and adored simply because of you. Who is happier to see you when you come home? People living alone report less feelings of loneliness.

Calming effects of stroking your cat or dog are widely known. Some suggest that this stress

reducing activity can actually lower blood pressure. Clarissa Baldwin, Chief Executive Officer of the charity Dogs Trust says, "We all know that dogs offer companionship and make us laugh, but they provide wider health benefits too." Dog owners are generally healthier and make fewer visits to their general practitioner.<sup>2</sup>

## Owning a Dog Helps You Get More Exercise

Throughout the last 30 years, there has been increasing scientific evidence that pets can help keep us fit and well. Pets can even help speed up recovery after major illness.<sup>3</sup>

Don't want to spend money on a gym membership or diet program? Take over the duty of walking the family dog. Don't have one? Rescue one from the animal shelter. Here's why: walking your dog 20 minutes a day, five days a week produced an average weight-loss of 14 pounds for participants in a University of Missouri – Columbus study.

The study found that having a dog to walk can make a difference between getting out and walking daily or skipping a day. The commitment to your dog enforces faithfulness to a simple exercise program.



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Michigan State University researcher Mathew Reaves an epidemiologist, published a study in March of this year in the Journal of Physical Activity and Health, which found dog owners were 34 percent more likely to get the exercise they needed to meet the federal guidelines for physical activity of 150 minutes a week, guidelines that less than half of Americans currently achieve.

Walking at a moderate pace for 30-60 minutes burns stored fat and can build muscle to speed up your metabolism (although resistance training, such as hill climbing, is the best for muscle building). Walking an hour a day is also associated with cutting your risk of heart disease, breast cancer, colon cancer, diabetes and stroke.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Mayo Clinic, exercise and cutting calories helps lose weight and equally important, regular exercise is one of the most powerful habits not to regain weight. Brisk walking of 15 minutes burns approximately 100 calories, although sex, speed, terrain, stride and intensity can alter caloric expenditure.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

Having a pet can be a wonderful and exciting way to increase the frequency of your exercise and have fun doing it! Don't have a dog? Adopt one. Because of the recession, there are more dogs than ever that need a loving home. According to the Humane Society of the United States, there are 4 million dogs and cats euthanized each year. If your lifestyle doesn't allow you to have a dog, you can volunteer at a local shelter to walk a dog for them.

So get your loyal furry friend and get going. To lose weight and keep it off, you need to get moving! Isn't it time to get healthier and happier? Then isn't it time to work an hour walk a day into your busy lifestyle? Ask your dog, I think he or she would agree. I know my girl Emily sure does.

### ***About the Author:***

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*“Emily”*

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# ABOUT THE OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.



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