

## **PETS AND THE HEALTH CONNECTION**

Chewy and CoCo came running into the house. They were both excited to see me. Jumping and running around was their usual behavior. Happy—happy—happy was their message—and how I love my little dogs! They bring unconditional positive love into my life. They lift my spirits and give me those sweet kisses (licks) on my cheeks. Their energy, cuteness, and love of life brighten my day! As an older adult, the benefits are more surprising than I realized before they became a part of my life. For most adults, no matter a person's age, a dog's sweet presence uplifts a person's mental and emotional state. Pets live in the moment—no worries about yesterday or tomorrow—they help us as pet owners to enjoy the present. Pets add structure to our daily lives as they require the consistent structure of feeding and exercising. What a wonderful way to extend our love to a creature of our world. And—what a wonderful opportunity it is for a family to share and teach children the essence of extended love and caring for the domesticated animals in our world!

Why pets? Pets, in general, can improve our mental and physical health. In addition to a dog, a rabbit can be ideal for someone struggling with allergies or limited space. Birds encourage social interaction and can keep our minds sharp, and some birds learn to talk enough to increase positive interaction with a person. Reptiles can make exotic companions, and fish in an aquarium can decrease muscle tension and pulse rates. Physiologically changes in adults can be significant.

## **HISTORY OF PET-KEEPING**

Humans came by their desire to have pets from 8000 to 2500 BC when permanent settlements commenced. Humans have bred canines (starting with wolves) for 15,000 years. Historical pictures show that kings and queens had portraits painted of their pets—even had clothing made for them. The clothing of

some known aristocrats had pockets wherein they could stash and carry their small sweet pets.

## **HEALTH BENEFITS OF PET-KEEPING—FOR ADULTS**

Domesticated pets, for most adults, have a calming effect. Pets often find their place at the side of the human who loves them. How easy it is for most pets to return love—not asking for very much—and not making demands on the owner! It is often unfortunate that such wonderful unsolicited offerings of love from pets are sometimes dismissed with limited human attention. Where emotional caring between humans might take years, a dog’s ability to emotionally care for a human only takes about three months. Dogs show evidence of feeling fear, shame, happiness, and unconditional love, which adds to an owner’s healthful feelings.

Pets (even fish) in a tank often find a special place in nursing homes/long-term facilities where they seem to meet residents who share unconditional love and interest. Yes, even just watching fish is therapeutic. Sometimes that sharing of unspoken love is the only loving response some residents have an opportunity to share. Even hardened criminals in prison have long-term personality changes of expressing mutual affection for the first time when they have a pet available to care for and to provide personal comfort.

Wellness Institute at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago found that adult ambulatory owners walking an overweight dog for 20 minutes 5 days a week helped animals and owners to shed unwanted pounds—losing an average of 14.4 pounds/year without dietary changes. The pet becomes the “Human Exercise Buddy.” Also, Mars Petcare Dog Food claims that ambulatory people with a dog walk 30 minutes more per week than before owning a dog.

As adults, studies have shown the benefits for this age group (adults) will include the following:

1. Decrease in loneliness
2. Decrease in depression
3. Boost in mood

4. Provide something soft to touch—including stroking, hugging, and touching causing a rapid calming and soothing in times of stress
5. Increase calmness and relaxation
6. Decrease in blood pressure through stroking and petting
7. Provide a sense of protection and safety
8. Protect the heart due to a calming effect
9. Improve cardiovascular health—(patients prone to heart attacks survive longer than those without a pet)
10. Decrease stress and lower blood pressure
11. Prevent coming home to an empty and lonely house
12. Help to cope with crises
13. Help to be more mobile
14. Help to be more sociable
15. Help to teach love-of-life
16. Provide a supportive companion(s)
17. Help attractiveness, caring attitudes, and loving behaviors
18. Decrease doctor office visits by 30% in people greater than 65 years of age
19. Provide a listening companion that helps work through problems

And—how can we not love them (any pet) because they are chosen by us and respond to us as our friends? Pets listen to us, don't complain about us, and love us no matter what! ---Now, as a rational adult, who can ignore such cuteness, lovability, and healthy positive input into our lives?

### **HEALTH BENEFITS OF PET-KEEPING—ESPECIALLY A DOG--FOR CHILDREN**

Australian Researchers have found that with children between the ages of 3-5, there are numerous positive outcomes/benefits to having a dog in the home. As children the benefits for this age group (children) will include the following:

1. Increase in sociability
2. Increase in positive behavior
3. Decrease in conduct problems

4. Increase in prosocial behavior
5. Increase in physical activity
6. Enhancement in social adjustment and sociability
7. Increase in social development
8. Increase in emotional development
9. Decrease in peer problems
10. Decrease in anxiety
11. Increase in positive moods
12. Decrease in stress
13. Increase in positive and relaxing influence on behavior
14. Increase in ability to care for pets
15. Increase the chance of a secure and active life during the growing process

## **THE MIMICKING DOG**

Historically, there is written documentation of “The Curious Mimic Dog” in long-forgotten texts and mysterious accounts. The official name was Getulian Dog, *Canis getulis*, and *Lucernarius*. Numerous times this dog was written about as being able to mimic anything it saw or heard—even the sounds and behavior of people. It was stated to exist in the Middle East, Northern Africa, Egypt, and Libiyan Peninsula. With its long legs, the body of long shaggy hair, a short tail, and a sharp pointed face, some believed it to be a monkey. However, the accounts of such a creature identified as a “dog” were widespread.

Today’s domesticated dog has some of the same mimicking qualities. Dogs do mimic their owners. The known “Rapid Mimicry Gaze” from a dog with a mirror-type response happens in one second. It is like a synchronizing dance between owner and dog—being happy when the owner shows happiness, “wild” by jumping and running when the owner shows excitement, and getting into “trouble” when the owner is verbally boisterous, over-physically active, or scolding the dog. Dogs have their personalities—just like people—, and they do mimic their owner and support the owner’s health by --- loving—guarding—leading—walking with--and being a best friend.

## **DOGS RECOGNIZE YOUR ILLNESS**

When you are sick—dogs will often become transformed. During the owner's illness, the dog is usually quiet and transformed into a nursing role. The dog often stays close to the owner, on top of the owner, or will not leave the owner. With a change in the owner's body chemistry, a dog can often detect those bodily changes. This tenacity for closeness to an owner with all their body language is the dog's way to becoming an owner's so-called nurse. A dog's absolute comfort extended toward the owner helps bring the dog owner back to health. Such nurturing is a wonderful component of a dog's personality. The dog may also recognize a return to improved health by sensing the owner's emotions and facial expressions. As an outcome of special training, a dog can sense cancer, seizures, diabetes, narcolepsy, migraine headaches, stress, and anxiety.

My best friends: CoCo and Chewy, just climbed on my lap. They improve my health in so many ways! The synchronization of puppy needs and personal emotional support is a part of life. I know what they want and when they want it. And—like many pet owners, our pets are very special to us. They meet all the health connections stated above and even more! With pets, love abounds, and blessings evolve. We are all happier because of our pet's closeness and love.

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