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*Friends with Benefits*

Veterinarian Reports Increasing Health Advantages for Pet Owners

*Streetsboro, Ohio (April 29, 2015)* - Animals make just as good friends as they do pets. Research increasingly shows they are also good for your health. An Ohio [veterinarian](http://www.animaldogtor.com/) has been observing this for years and today speaks out on healthy lifestyles regarding the advantages of man’s best friend.

“When animals and humans bond, good things happen. When it comes to pet ownership, there are proven health benefits for people - including physical, mental and emotional improvements,” [Dr. Scott Leffler](http://www.animaldogtor.com/) of the [Animal Medical Center of Streetsboro](http://www.animaldogtor.com/) said. Every May, he sees a spike in the energy and health in his four-legged patients’ owners. “They’re getting more exercise. When the weather breaks they start taking their pets for longer walks, going to the dog park, heading to training classes. It shows in their overall health,” Leffler said.

Studies show pet owners fare better with self-esteem, loneliness, illness, depression and activity level. For nearly 25 years, research shows living with pets provides health benefits. “Pets provide unconditional love and acceptance and they’re always there for you. I can feel the bond and I see the companionship every day. It makes a difference,” Leffler said.

In fact, 97 percent of doctors believe patients reap health benefits from owning a pet, according to the Human-Animal Bond Research Initiative Foundation (HABRI), a nonprofit research and education organization. A 2015 [HABRI survey](http://www.habri.org/2014-physician-survey.php) found 69 percent of physicians have successfully worked with animal patient therapy or treatment. They report interactions with animals improve patients' physical and mental health as well as their mood and relationships with medical staff. Mayo Clinic uses canine assisted therapy, where a dog and their handler go into a hospital room and visit with a patient. Doctors have found that interacting with animals can increase oxytocin levels, a hormone that makes us feel happy and trusting.

At Leffler’s animal hospital, owners frequently come in spouting tales about their pet’s adventures, mishaps or achievements. “Their pets are their children, friends and greatest fans. Somehow the furry ones get them to smile no matter how stressed they are,” he said.

Seeing a pet’s enthusiasm when you walk in the door can be an instant mood-lifting boost. Their tail is wagging, tongue hanging out, the ears perking up. The pet doesn't care if you faltered something at work or failed a test - they’re just happy to see you. According the North American Pet Health Insurance Association, pet owners tend to have a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, higher survival rates from heart attacks and less needs for visits to the doctor.

Studies have also shown that [Alzheimer's](http://www.webmd.com/alzheimers/default.htm) patients have fewer anxious outbursts if there is an animal in the home. Like any enjoyable activity, playing with a dog can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine -- nerve transmitters that are known to have pleasurable and calming properties.

Many pet owners would agree the unconditional love of a pet can fill your heart with love. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institute of Health (NIH) have conducted heart-related studies on people who have pets. The findings show pet owners exhibit decreased blood pressure, cholesterol and triglyceride levels; all of which can ultimately minimize their risk for having a heart attack down the road. For those who have already experienced a heart attack, research also indicates that patients with a dog or a cat tend to have better recovery rates.

Sixty-eight percent of U.S. households, or about 82.5 million families, own a pet, according to the 2013-2014 National Pet Owners Survey conducted by the American Pet Products Association (APPA).

 “As is the case with people, a dog’s health changes with age. Unfortunately, our pets age much faster than we do,” Leffler said, emphasizing the importance of wellness checkups for pets. “As a member of your family, you want your pet to live the longest, happiest and healthiest lives possible,” he added. The American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Animal Hospital Association's preventive care guidelines say that dogs and cats should visit the veterinarian *at least* annually; in many cases, more frequent healthy-pet checkups are necessary.

Scientific research shows human health benefits of owning a pet include:

* Lowered Risk of Heart Disease
* Lowered Risk of Hypertension
* Slower Heart Rate
* Reduced Frequency of Doctor Visits
* Increased Capacity of Dealing with Stress/Traumatic Events
* Faster Rehabilitation Following Trauma
* Increased Survival Rates from Heart Attacks
* Relief of Depression/Dementia in Seniors
* Lowered Risk of Allergens in Children
* Increased Chance of Being Physically Active
* Improved Quality of Life
* Lowered Risk of Seizure in Epileptics

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