

Is Your Pet Helping You Stay Mentally Sharp?

Can caring for a dog, cat or other animal companion for five years or longer actually affect your cognitive health? This study of 1,369 Medicare beneficiaries sheds light on one of the lesser known yet wondrous benefits of pet ownership, on top of the mental health benefits for people of all ages.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A recent study shows that pet ownership, especially long-term (5 years or longer) pet ownership, may be associated with slower cognitive decline in older adults
- The study of 1,369 Medicare beneficiaries showed that long-term pet owners, on average, had a cognitive composite score that was 1.2 points higher at six years compared to non-pet owners
- Past studies have shown that pet ownership gives people of all ages a sense of purpose in life, which is closely linked to feelings of well-being
- Other studies have demonstrated that pets help their owners get exercise and stay active, which is a proven strategy to improve mental health

If you're a devoted pet parent, you know that having a furry family member at home can enhance your life in countless ways, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically. And now to further reinforce the case for having a dog, cat, or other animal companion, a recent study shows that long-term pet ownership, especially five years or longer, may be linked to slower decline in cognition in older adults.¹

*"Prior studies have suggested that the **human-animal bond** may have health benefits like decreasing blood pressure and stress," study co-author Tiffany Braley, MD, of the University of Michigan Medical Center and member of the American Academy of Neurology said in a press release. "Our results suggest pet ownership may also be protective against cognitive decline."²*

Long-Term Pet Parenting Helps Seniors Stay Mentally Sharp

For the study, the researchers evaluated cognitive data for 1,369 adults with an average age of 65 who had normal cognitive skills at the start of the study. Of the 1,369, 88% were white, 7% were Black, 2% were Hispanic, and 3% were of another race or ethnicity. A total of 53% of the group owned pets, and 32% were long-term (five years or more) pet parents.

The research team's data source was a large study of Medicare beneficiaries, called the Health and Retirement Study, in which participants took multiple cognitive tests involving common subtraction, numeric counting, and word recall. Researchers used the results of those tests to arrive at a composite cognitive score for each person ranging from 0 to 27 and used those scores to estimate the associations between years of pet ownership and cognitive function.

The results showed that over a six-year period, cognitive scores decreased at a slower rate in pet owners, and especially among long-term pet owners. Considering other factors known to affect cognitive function, the study showed that long-term pet owners, on average, had a cognitive composite score that was 1.2 points higher at six years compared to non-pet owners. In addition, the cognitive benefits linked to longer term ownership were stronger for Black adults, adults with a college education, and men.

"As stress can negatively affect cognitive function, the potential stress-buffering effects of pet ownership could provide a plausible reason for our findings," said Braley. "A companion animal can also increase physical activity, which could benefit cognitive health. That said, more research is needed to confirm our results and identify underlying mechanisms for this association."

How Pets Help People of All Ages With Their Mental Health

A recent American Pet Products Association survey revealed that almost 90 million U.S. households include at least one pet,³ which means there are currently more households in this country with pets than without.

"The growing acceptance of pet ownership can be attributed, in part, to the maturation of the pet industry," says psychologist Mark Travers, Ph.D., in an article for Psychology Today. "Today, a number of innovative businesses are dedicated to making pet ownership easier, even for individuals with busy lifestyles — like online pet supply stores and in-house veterinary services."⁴

According to Travers, there are two ways pets help their humans preserve their mental health:

1. **Pet ownership gives people a sense of purpose, which is crucial to well-being** — Conventional wisdom would have us believe that human well-being is the result of happiness and the absence of physical and mental illness. However, an article published in the journal Health and Quality of Life Outcomes in 2020 analyzed data from 21 countries and suggests that well-being is the result of several factors, including having a sense of purpose in life.⁵

A 2018 study on the effects of pet ownership on people with a mental health condition found that those who reported losing their sense of purpose following their diagnosis regained control of the direction of their lives after adding a pet to their household. Some even reported that their pet gave them a reason to live.⁶

"Research has shown repeatedly that pets have the potential to increase feelings of social support, give owners a sense of meaning, and improve their lifestyles by increasing physical activity and adding structure to daily routines," writes Travers. "Pets are also particularly effective in treating and managing conditions such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and dementia, as evidenced by a 2022 study ... claiming that owning a pet can reduce one's brain age by up to 15 years."⁷

Travers consulted Zach Mills of The Vets, a veterinary care service focused on reducing the stress and anxiety associated with owning a pet, about what types of companion animals are most helpful in buffering mental and emotional health.

"The human-animal bond can extend to any number of animals, and different animals and different people will have different responses," says Mills. "There are also people who identify with one species of animal more than another. The individual results that people get can vary. Most of the studies around the benefits of the human-animal bond are done on dogs and horses, but any animal and human can potentially build a beneficial bond."

2. **Pets help us get exercise and stay active, which is a proven strategy to improve mental health** — It's no secret that physical activity can benefit psychological health, and people with pets, especially dogs who need to be walked and exercised outdoors, have an increased level of physical activity.

Travers points to a 2023 overview of 97 systematic reviews that revealed that exercise may be up to 1.5 times more effective in reducing symptoms of common mental health conditions compared to traditional methods of treatment.⁸ According to lead study author Ben Singh of the University of South Australia:

"We found that doing 150 minutes each week of various types of physical activity — such as brisk walking, lifting weights, and yoga — significantly reduces depression, anxiety and psychological distress, compared to usual care, such as medications."

However, Travers cautions, before getting a pet to improve your mental health through exercise, it's important to ensure your exercise goals are in alignment with the needs of a prospective animal companion. Especially in the case of dogs, while all require **regular walks**, there are significant differences in how much and what kind of exercise different breeds benefit from.

It's also important to note that while pet ownership can have positive psychological benefits, it shouldn't be viewed as an alternative to clinical treatment that may be necessary to address a specific mental health condition. A more integrative approach to treatment that includes pet ownership may be the most effective and rewarding of all.

Sources and References

¹ [Shieu, M. et al. Companion Animals and Cognitive Health: A Population-Based Study \(P1-6.004\), Neurology, May 03, 2022; 98 \(18 Supplement\).](#)

² [American Academy of Neurology, Press Release, February 23, 2022](#)

³ [APPA, Pet Industry Market Size, Trends & Ownership Statistics](#)

⁴ [Psychology Today, July 19, 2023](#)

⁵ [Ruggeri, K. et al. Health and Quality of Life Outcomes, 18, Article number: 192 \(2020\).](#)

⁶ [Brooks, H.L. et al. BMC Psychiatry volume 18, Article number: 31 \(2018\).](#)

⁷ [McDonough, I.M. et al. Front. Aging Neurosci., 20 October 2022 Sec. Neurocognitive Aging and Behavior Volume 14 - 2022](#)

⁸ [Singh, B. et al. British Journal of Sports Medicine, Published Online First: 16 February 2023](#)
