

Owning a Dog May Lower Your Blood Pressure

Owning a dog offers you a loyal companion, walking buddy and lifelong friend, but there are proven benefits to your heart health, too. Dog owners enjoy not only decreased blood pressure readings but also a reduced risk of heart disease and fewer doctor visits.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- In the study of 1,570 people aged 60 years or over, owning a dog was associated with a 3.34 mmHg decrease in systolic blood pressure
- The reduction in blood pressure could, in turn, lower dog owners' risk of stroke, heart disease and premature death
- Even the American Heart Association has stated that pets, particularly dogs, may help reduce your risk of heart disease

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When most people think about adding a dog to their family, it's probably the cuddles and companionship that you think of first. The benefits of pet ownership extend far beyond this, however, including leading to physical benefits to your health.

Researchers from Oregon State University even conducted a pilot study that found owning a dog may lead to lower levels of systolic blood pressure in older adults.¹

What's more, the benefit wasn't solely due to increased activity, such as taking the dog for a walk, which suggests there's another way your furry family member might be benefiting your health.

Owning a Dog May Lower Your Blood Pressure, Boost Heart Health

In the study of 1,570 people aged 60 years or over, owning a dog was associated with a 3.34 mmHg decrease in systolic blood pressure. Dr. Ragavendra Baliga, a cardiologist and professor of internal medicine at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center, told The Columbus Dispatch:

"To put that into perspective, even a 2 mm reduction in systolic blood pressure is associated with a 6 percent reduction in stroke, a 4 percent reduction in coronary heart disease and a 3 percent reduction in overall mortality."²

It's not the first time pet ownership has been linked to better heart health. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that pets can decrease your blood pressure and triglyceride levels, for instance.³

In 2013, the American Heart Association even announced that pets may help reduce your risk of heart disease.

They cited research presented at the 22nd Annual Scientific Sessions of the Society of Behavioral Medicine. The study involved 30 patients with borderline hypertension (high blood pressure) who either adopted a dog from a shelter or put off adoption.

In follow-ups at two and five months, those who went ahead with the adoption had significantly lower systolic blood pressure than those who did not. When all 30 had adopted a dog, the drop in blood pressure was similar for both groups.⁴

Separate research involving nearly 50 stockbrokers with high blood pressure also found that owning a pet led to fewer increases in blood pressure, heart rate and plasma renin activity during periods of mental stress.

That study, which was published in the journal *Hypertension*, concluded, "increased social support through pet ownership lowers blood pressure response to mental stress."⁵

Older Pet Owners May Enjoy Enhanced Health

There's a persistent dogma that older people shouldn't necessarily own pets, but fortunately this myth is being challenged by an increasing number of Baby Boomers who are choosing to enjoy pets in their lives.

Pets provide companionship, help you overcome loneliness and encourage you to stay active. One of the greatest benefits is that pets also help you stay focused on the present moment. Pets provide a focal point for your attention and help provide a routine to your day, something that many miss following retirement.

Dogs can also act as social icebreakers, helping you to make friends and may help to boost your mood and relieve depression.

Not to mention, pets give you a sense of purpose and add humor to your day, which is always welcome. The physical presence of a pet, providing a warm body to touch, also lends comfort to many pet owners who live alone.

Pet Owners Visit the Doctor Less Often

Researchers from George Mason University (GMU) conducted a study for The Human Animal Bond Research Initiative (HABRI) Foundation, which found Americans save \$11.7 billion annually in health care costs due to pet ownership.⁶

Part of those health savings come from reduced doctor visits. Pet owners — 132.8 million in all — visited a doctor 0.6 times less than non-pet owners.

The study found the average cost of a doctor visit is \$139, which led to savings of \$11.37 billion annually in health care costs. About 20 million dog owners also walked their pet five or more times a week, which led to even greater benefits.

The extra pet-related activity lowered the incidence of obesity in this group, leading to another \$419 million in health care savings. The study didn't even account for the stress-relief aspect of pet ownership, or the benefits of knowing you have a trusted companion waiting for you at home. Benefits such as these are priceless.

There Are Many Considerations to Pet Ownership

The American Heart Association concluded that pet ownership (particularly dog ownership) “is probably” associated with a decreased risk of heart disease and even may have a causal role in the reduction.⁷

However, they pointed out that you shouldn’t go out and adopt a dog for the primary purpose of boosting your heart health.

Instead, think of it as an added bonus. The decision to add a pet to your family isn't one to take lightly — or make solely based on potential health benefits. That being said, if you have the time, resources and desire for a new lifelong friend, the health gains represent the icing on the cake.

Sources and References

^{1, 2} [The Columbus Dispatch February 28, 2016](#)

³ [U.S. CDC, Health Benefits of Pets](#)

⁴ [MedPageToday May 10, 2013](#)

⁵ [Hypertension. 2001 Oct;38\(4\):815-20.](#)

⁶ [HABRI December 14, 2015](#)

⁷ [Circulation May 9, 2013](#)
