

Live Alone? Getting a Dog May Be Good for Your Heart

Having a pet to come home to doesn't just warm your heart, it also protects it. Especially among singles living alone, having a pet offers incredible benefits to heart health and more, according to a new large study, which even reveals the type of dogs that lower heart disease risk the most.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- People who owned a dog were 11 percent less likely to die from any cause and 15 percent less likely to die of a heart problem during the study period, but those living alone gained an added benefit of reduced heart attack risk
- Singles living alone were 11 percent less likely to have a heart attack along with 33 percent less likely to die of any cause and 36 percent likely to die of a heart problem compared to single non-dog owners
- Owning a hunting breed of dog, such as a retriever or scent hound, was associated with the lowest risk of heart disease overall

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In 2013, the American Heart Association released a scientific statement relaying that pet ownership, and dog ownership in particular, is "probably associated with decreased CVD [cardiovascular disease] risk" and "may have some causal role in reducing CVD risk."¹ Other studies have been conflicting on the role dogs play in their owners' heart health, but a Scientific Reports study, released in November 2017,² once again points toward the positive — especially for single people who live alone.

The large study involved health records from 3.4 million people in Sweden, between the ages of 40 and 80. Those who owned a dog were 11 percent less likely to die from any cause and 15 percent less likely to die of a heart problem during the 12 years included in the study, but those living alone gained an added benefit of reduced heart attack risk.^{3,4}

The latter population was 11 percent less likely to have a heart attack along with 33 percent less likely to die of any cause and 36 percent likely to die of a heart problem compared to single non-dog owners. Owning a hunting breed of dog, such as a retriever or **scent hound**, was associated with the lowest risk of heart disease overall.

What Makes Owning a Dog so Good for Your Heart?

There are a number of reasons why owning a dog benefits your health, with the first being that it may encourage you to be more active. Separate studies have shown that dog owners engage in more walking and physical activity than non-dog owners,⁵ although it's possible that people who are more active to begin with are more likely to adopt dogs.

Still, if your furry pooch giving you his puppy-dog eyes motivates you to get up off the couch on a day you may have otherwise stayed in, it's a win for everyone.

In a study of older adults, dog walking was associated with lower body mass index, fewer doctor visits, fewer limitations to daily living, and more frequent moderate and vigorous exercise.⁶ Singles, in particular, may benefit further because dogs act as a "social lubricant" and can be a catalyst to forming new friendships.

Pet owners are significantly more likely to get to know people in their neighborhood than non-pet owners, for instance, and dog owners in particular are more likely to receive social support from people they've met through their pet.⁷

Since loneliness and social isolation are risk factors for heart disease,⁸ your dog's ability to act as a conduit for new friendships is a great one. Owning a dog is also good for your blood pressure, being associated with a 3.34-mmHg decrease in systolic blood pressure, which in turn lowers your heart disease risk.⁹

Then there's the good feeling you get when you spend time cuddling with your pooch. Mutual gazes shared between you and your dog lead to the release of oxytocin, the "love hormone" that's also protective of your heart.¹⁰ There may be additional factors that are still undiscovered, even down to the way owning a dog affects the microbes in your gut. Senior study author Dr. Tove Fall, associate professor in epidemiology at Uppsala University in Sweden, told Bloomberg:¹¹

"We know that dog owners in general have a higher level of physical activity, which could be one explanation to the observed results ... Other explanations include an increased well-being and social contacts or effects of the dog on the bacterial microbiome in the owner."

Single Pet Ownership Is on the Rise

The fact that owning a pet is so good for your heart and overall mortality is great news for the increasing number of singles choosing to adopt a pet. The number of single adults with pets increased over 16 percent from 2006 to 2011. During the same five-year period, the number of families with pets grew less than 1.5 percent, while single men living alone with pets increased from 34 to 44 percent and single women living alone with a pet rose from 47 percent to 57 percent.¹²

Beyond the benefits to your heart, having a pet to come home to is great for your morale. Past research of adult students revealed, for instance, that "having a pet can help to diminish feelings of loneliness, particularly for women living alone, and compensate for the absence of human companionship."¹³

Similar benefits have been reported among older women living alone,¹⁴ while pets have even been described as "friends with benefits," such as helping their owners achieve greater self-esteem and better stave off negativity caused by social rejection.¹⁵

If you're single and looking for love, it's important to find a companion who's open to pets as well, and this needn't be a challenge. You can meet other pet lovers by volunteering at your local animal shelter, getting involved in agility training or trying a pet-centric dating site. Of course, you may decide that you like things better the way they are, just your dog and you!

Sources and References

¹ [Circulation June 10, 2013](#)

² [Sci Rep. 2017; 7: 15821](#)

^{3, 11} [Bloomberg November 17, 2017](#)

⁴ [CNN November 19, 2017](#)

⁵ [J Phys Act Health. 2013 Jul;10\(5\):750-9. Epub 2012 Sep 18.](#)

⁶ [The Gerontologist March 19, 2016](#)

⁷ [PLOS One April 29, 2015](#)

⁸ [Heart 2016;102:1009-1016](#)

⁹ [The Columbus Dispatch February 28, 2016](#)

¹⁰ [J Neuroendocrinol. 2012 Apr;24\(4\):599-608](#)

¹² [Veterinary Practice News March 22, 2013](#)

¹³ [Psychol Rep. 1994 Oct;75\(2\):747-52](#)

¹⁴ [Aging Ment Health. 2014;18\(3\):394-9](#)

¹⁵ [J Pers Soc Psychol. 2011 Dec;101\(6\):1239-52](#)
