

Want to have a healthier, happier life? Get a dog

By Natalie McGill

Dog ownership can be hard but rewarding work. After all, you're responsible for feeding, walking and providing care for your dog so she or he can live a long, healthy life.



But you may not be aware that your dog is helping keep you healthier, too. Research is growing on the health benefits that dogs can provide for their owners, says Sandy Barker, PhD, NCC, LPC, director of the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Medicine Center for Human-Animal Interaction.

There are physical, mental and social benefits that come with dog ownership. When it comes to physical activity, owning a dog provides a number of ways to stay fit without you realizing it. Walking your dog outside or playing fetch not only gets your dog moving, it gets your arms and legs moving, too.

More and more research says that owning a dog can potentially increase your quality of life and help get you through life's stresses, Barker says.

As a benefit, studies have found that being with dogs helps reduce your blood pressure and heart rate. Owning a dog has also been linked to having lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

People with dogs also have better survival rates a year after a heart attack, studies show.

Dogs can also provide a sense of social support as people become busier or have fewer human interactions, Barker says.

"In one of our earliest studies, we looked at the

emotional closeness between people and their pet dogs and we found that owners were as emotionally close to their pet dogs as to any human family member," Barker says. "And, actually, about a third of those owners were closer to their pet dogs than to any human family member. So we know that it's a very close emotional bond."

Dog ownership is also good for a child's emotional health because it gives kids the experience of sharing their feelings and emotions for another living being, Barker says.

"That makes sense when you consider if the child is responsible for the pet, is interacting with the pet, that being interactive with a live being could contribute to the development of empathy," Barker says. "And it's a very important

health factor for children."

Aside from the physical and mental health benefits, your social life may expand with a dog in tow. Dog ownership provides plenty of opportunities for social interaction, whether you're at a dog park with other dog owners, or if you're just walking down the street with a leash in hand.

Also, research has found that adults and children with disabilities are also more likely to have more social interaction if they own a service dog, Barker says.

"Pets have been called — particularly dogs — 'social lubricants' because of studies that have been done of people walking alone



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or walking with a dog where there's far more social interaction with the dog present," Barker says. "When I would come into



the hospital with my therapy dog, just for me to get from the parking deck to my office would take considerably more time because of people smiling

and wanting to quickly pet the dog or just briefly interact. They are these natural magnets for social interaction."

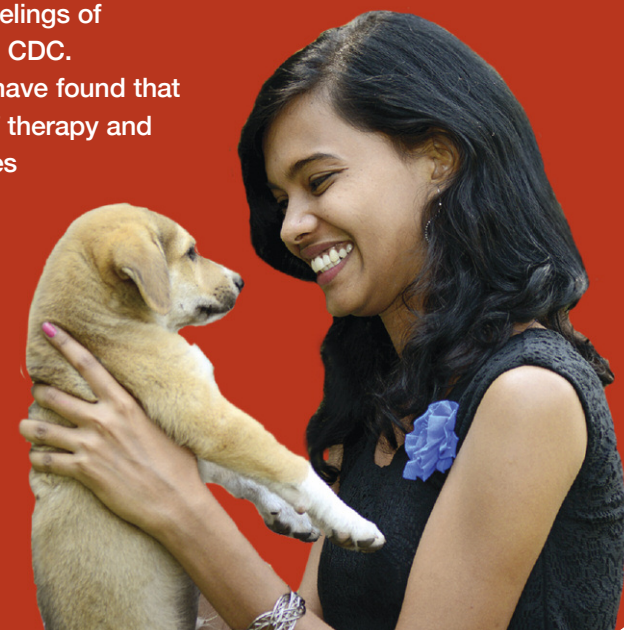


Dogs can be good for your emotional health

Being a dog owner can have a positive effect on your emotional well-being. Having a pet, such as a dog, can help you fight off feelings of loneliness, according to CDC.

Barker says studies have found that using dogs as a form of therapy and pet ownership decreases feelings of loneliness and depression.

Studies show dogs can help boost moods in humans and calm feelings of anxiety or fear before medical procedures, particularly for people receiving psychiatric care, Barker says.



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