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## ***Pets and Health – Is There a Connection?***

*Does having a pet improve your health? I sure hope so, considering I live with four cats and a dog!*

According to research, those with pets do receive health benefits from hanging out with – and taking care of – their non-human kids:

- A pet may increase your opportunity to exercise and get outside
- Having a pet may provide opportunities to socialize with other pet parents
- Interacting with animals has been shown to decrease levels of cortisol (a stress-related hormone)
- Regular walking or playing with pets can decrease blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and triglyceride levels
- Pets can help manage loneliness and depression by giving us companionship; they even improve cognitive function in older adults
- Pets can help reduce anxiety and symptoms of PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder)

Check out [this 3-minute video](#) to learn more:

Pets provide unconditional love, which helps decrease stress and improve our heart health, and can even help children with emotional and social skills. Different pets provide different health benefits. For example, caring for a dog or a horse will increase your physical activity, whereas caring for and watching your fish, or petting and listening to your cat purr may help you relax!

According to [this 6-min video](#), there are seven ways that owning a pet improves your mental health:

- 1) They encourage you to be active, thereby releasing endorphins which improve your mood
- 2) Pets can sense when something is not right with us and our routine
- 3) Pets give us a reason to get out of bed when we are down, and provide a positive feeling when we provide them with care
- 4) You are never alone

- 5) Taking care of your pet adds structure and routine to your schedule
- 6) You will meet other people who are pet owners or pet lovers
- 7) Pets help you live in the moment and encourage mindfulness

## **Specialized Pets**

Pets with specific training can be therapeutic, enable people to be more independent, and even provide life-saving services.

Animals can serve as a source of comfort and support. Therapy horses (including miniature horses) and dogs are especially good at this. They are sometimes brought into hospitals or nursing homes to help reduce patients' stress and anxiety.

As many of our members have likely seen, dogs may also aid in the classroom. One study found that dogs can help children with ADHD (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) focus their attention. In another study, kids who read to real animals showed better social skills and more sharing, cooperation, and volunteering. They also had fewer behavioural problems.

Another study found that children with autism spectrum disorder were calmer while playing with guinea pigs in the classroom. The children also had better social interactions and were more engaged with their peers. The researchers suggest that the animals offered unconditional acceptance, making them a calm comfort to the children.

Animals can be trained to identify serious health conditions as well as provide warning to their owners of a potential health event. For example, dogs can be trained to:

- Alert their owners of upcoming epileptic symptoms and provide a seizure response
- Identify low or high spikes in blood glucose levels for folks with diabetes
- Potentially detect certain forms of cancer
- Identify cardiovascular issues such as high blood pressure, imminent heart attack, and stroke
- Warn of an upcoming migraine

It was great to learn that the bond and caring relationship between humans and their pets has positive health benefits, regardless of the type of pet! Choosing the right pet for you is an important decision, and one that should not be rushed. Your lifestyle, budget, and the time and effort you can dedicate to a pet will need to be considered before inviting a new member into your home.

For fun, I found [this video](#) on the findings of research between cat versus dog people: *do you agree with the researcher's conclusions?*

## Sources

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Morandini', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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If you would like to contribute or have ideas about what you would like to see in the ReFresh series, we would love to hear from you: contact [rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca](mailto:rochelle@bcpvpa.bc.ca).