



PET OWNERSHIP

According to the American Association of Pet Products Manufacturers 2005/2006 National Pet Owners Survey:

- 63% of U.S. households have a pet, which equates to 69.1 million homes
- 45% of U.S. households have more than one pet
- In 1988, the first year the survey was conducted, 56% of U.S. households had a pet as compared to the 63% of present day

More than half of American homes include at least one pet, and many pet owners report that their pets' companionship makes them feel better. Along with anecdotal evidence, many researchers have provided data to back up those claims.

SURVIVING A MAJOR ILLNESS

Two studies have shown that having a dog had a significant effect on survival after a heart attack. The effect was independent of the severity of cardiovascular disease. Patients who were admitted to the hospital with a heart attack were followed for one year. The researchers found that patients who were alive one year after leaving the hospital were more likely to have a pet.

OVERALL HEALTH AND COSTS

People who have pets report better health when compared to non-pet parents. It has been shown that pet parents on Medicaid make fewer visits to their doctors than non-pet parents.

The use of prescription drugs and the overall cost of caring for patients in nursing homes dropped in those facilities where companion animals became part of the therapy.

People with pets have been found to have lower cholesterol and triglyceride levels when compared to people who did not have pets, even when matched for weight, diet, and smoking habits.

SOCIAL BENEFITS

Studies show that animals can act as "social lubricants" to facilitate social interactions.

Peter Messent of the Animal Studies Center in London studied people walking a dog through a park. People walking with a dog were observed to engage in more social activity than a control group who walked in a park alone. The dogs' presence sparked conversation that would not have occurred otherwise.

Multiple studies have shown that the presence of an animal leads to the interpretation of social scenes as less threatening by observers. The character of people associated with animals is rated more highly.

ANXIETY AND RELAXATION

The rhythmic, repetitive activity of petting an animal can act as a passive meditative focus. Interacting with an animal has been shown to reduce the cardiovascular, behavioral, and psychological indicators of stress.

Watching fish in an aquarium proved as effective as hypnosis in reducing anxiety in dental surgery patients. Simply being in the presence of a friendly dog reduced blood pressure and heart rates in children.

Animals have been used by psychiatrists and psychologists in formal psychotherapy for many years. Informally, owners typically talk to their animals as if they were human. We can unload our problems, fears and concerns to them without fear of being judged. Animals are always good listeners, never give bad advice and are always supportive.

PET VISITATION PROGRAMS

The National Institute of Health reviewed studies of pet programs for nursing home and health center residents. In institutions that care for the elderly, the presence of animals is associated with the tendency of patients to smile and talk more, reach out toward people and objects, exhibit more alertness and attention, and experience more symptoms of well-being and less depression. Pet programs have proven superior to some other alternative therapies in producing psychosocial benefits in comparison (e.g., arts and crafts programs, friendly visitor programs, and conventional psychotherapy).

INCREASED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The need to exercise and care for pets keeps pet parents active and provides increased outdoor activity. Pets are nonjudgmental playmates who provide play on demand. They are always willing to chase a ball, go for a walk or interact with us. Play is essential for social, intellectual, physical and emotional growth for children.

Information compiled from the research of Dr. Kevin Connelly, founder of the Paws for Health program of the Richmond SPCA.

Additional resources:

American Pet Products Manufacturer's Association: http://www.appma.org/press_industrytrends.asp

National Institutes of Health: <http://consensus.nih.gov/1987/1987HealthBenefitsPetsta003html.htm>

PetEducation.com: <http://www.peteducation.com/article.cfm?cls=0&cat=1491&articleid=638>