

Furry Friends

by Leah Paulos

Pets can be fluffy and fun-and good for your health!

One afternoon last fall, Jacki, 11, of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., was stressing out while studying for a big science test the next day. "I was so nervous that I wasn't getting much done. So I went over to Crookshanks and Hermione, my two long-haired Persian cats, and I started petting them," she says. "They are so soft, and the look on their faces made me laugh. I relaxed right away, and then I went back to studying."



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Even a scaly lizard can help people improve their health.

Though this may sound like a tall tale from a cat-obsessed girl, it's not! Many scientific studies have shown that dogs, cats, rabbits, gerbils, snakes, lizards, fish, ferrets, and birds, among other pets, help relieve stress. They bring many other health (and happiness) benefits too. People might not know about the studies showing that pets make people feel great, but clearly they know *something* makes them love the furry, feathered, and scaly creatures. After all, there are 360 million pets in the United States-that's 50 million more pets than people!

Perks of Pets

Scientists have done hundreds of studies on the perks of pet ownership. Their conclusion: As long as you're not someone who is scared of animals, owning a pet is one of the most enjoyable ways you can improve your health. "All types of pets-not just cats and dogs-have been shown to lower blood pressure, calm stress, and decrease heart rate," says Bonnie Beaver, a veterinarian and professor at Texas A&M University. "All of these results are important for overall health."

People with pets tend to move more too-and the benefits of exercise are well known. Physical activity helps a person maintain a healthy weight and *cardiovascular* (the heart and blood vessel system in the body) health.

So how does Fido keep a person's heart healthy? People who have dogs go for walks five times more often than people who don't have dogs. Chasing a kitten around the house gets a person moving too. Even playing with a gerbil or cleaning out an aquarium gets a person off the couch.

Happy Together

The good news about Snazzy the snake and Bucky the bunny doesn't stop there! Simply put, pets make their people happy. "Having a pet often makes kids feel less lonely and isolated and more connected and happy," says Dr. Rachel Fleissner, a child and adolescent psychiatrist in Fargo, N.D.

"This is because kids develop strong relationships with their pets. They become good friends."

Jakob, 10, from Reno, Nev., loves that his cockatoo, Bobby, is always there waiting for him after school. "If I watch TV with him in the room, I don't even feel like I am by myself," he says.

The fact that animals are extremely loyal pals is part of their appeal. They are always there for you, whether you get in a fight with your best friend, move to another house or state, or break your mom's favorite vase. Unlike humans, pets listen to you without judging. That is why so many pet owners—grown-ups and kids alike—talk to their pets about their day, their problems, what to wear to school today ... anything. Gerbils and parakeets (and other pets) aren't critical of what you're saying. They won't be angry at you if you forget to unload the dishwasher.

"Animals are also good at perceiving body language, and they'll often comfort their owners when [the owners are] sad," says Fleissner. This unconditional affection calms the pet owner. In fact, the ability of animals to comfort people is one of the reasons many doctors, including Fleissner, use therapy dogs in their practices. Therapy dogs are specially trained to soothe and cheer up people in hospitals, doctors' offices, or their own homes. "It's amazing how positive the results are," she says.

It makes sense that people sometimes treat their own creatures like little humans when the pets make them feel so good. This is all fine, says Beaver, as long as people don't forget that the pets really are animals. Pet owners have to take care of their pets' health the way the animals take care of their owners'.

So save the ice cream for your people friends, give pets attention and exercise, make sure their habitats are clean and their food is fresh, and then holler out: Long live the pets!

Are You Ready For A Pet?

Before you ask your parents for a buddy, have you thought of the things below?

You have enough room in your home.

Pets and their equipment require varying amounts of space. Dogs and cats need extra space to move around.

You spend enough time at home.

Pets are dependent on their owners for everything: food, companionship, and *hygiene* (cleanliness). Do you have enough time to devote to taking care of a pet?

A pet is allowed where you live.

Cats and dogs are sometimes banned from apartment buildings. In addition, some snakes and exotic pets are outlawed by local governments.

You can afford a pet.

You need to be able to pay for food, medical care, and some equipment. The price of the animal is just the beginning.

No one in your home has pet allergies.

Save yourself a lot of heartbreak by finding out before you bring your new pet home.

If You Can't Get Your Own Pet ...

you can still benefit from animals in the following ways:

- Volunteer at a local humane society or animal shelter. You can also help at a hospital that uses therapy dogs or at a nursing home that has aquariums.
- Offer to help take care of a neighbor's pet. Many neighbors might be thrilled to know they can count on you when they're out of town, working late, or sick.
- Put up a bird feeder outside your window.
- Wildlife is all around you. Take a hike around a nearby forest or pond, or volunteer at a local nature center.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the text, how many pets are there in the U.S.?

- A. too many to count
- B. 360 million
- C. 50 million
- D. 10 million

2. What effect can pets have on people who are sad?

- A. Pets can sometimes make people angry.
- B. Pets can surprise people.
- C. Pets can soothe and cheer people up.
- D. Pets have no effect on people who are sad.

3. Having pets can be good for your emotional health.

What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

- A. "Unlike humans, pets listen to you without judging. That is why so many pet owners-grown-ups and kids alike-talk to their pets about their day, their problems, what to wear to school today . . . anything."
- B. "People with pets tend to move more too-and the benefits of exercise are well known. Physical activity helps a person maintain a healthy weight and *cardiovascular* (the heart and blood vessel system in the body) health."
- C. "It makes sense that people sometimes treat their own creatures like little humans when the pets make them feel so good. This is all fine, says Beaver, as long as people don't forget that the pets really are animals."
- D. "People might not know about the studies showing that pets make people feel great, but clearly they know *something* makes them love the furry, feathered, and scaly creatures."

4. What can be inferred from the text?

- A. All people are allergic to pets.
- B. There are lots of things to think about before getting a pet.
- C. Pets are easy to take care of and do not require a lot of work.
- D. Everyone is ready to own a pet.

5. What is this text mostly about?

- A. the positive effects of having a pet
- B. the best places to hike around in nature to see animals
- C. how to attract birds to your home with a birdfeeder
- D. types of pet allergies

6. Read these sentences from the text.

Offer to help take care of a neighbor's pet. Many neighbors might be **thrilled** to know they can count on you when they're out of town, working late, or sick.

As used in these sentences, what does the word "**thrilled**" mean?

- A. worried
- B. disappointed
- C. very happy
- D. not satisfied

7. Choose the word that best completes the sentence.

Before you get a pet, you should make sure you have enough room in your house _____ dogs and cats need extra space to move around.

- A. because
- B. after
- C. but
- D. before

8. According to the text, how does owning a pet improve an owner's physical health?

9. Why might a dog owner get more exercise than a lizard owner? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.