

Q&A: How owning pets can lead to a healthier lifestyle

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DEAR MAYO CLINIC: I have been working from home as a result of COVID-19. The adjustment has been difficult, and created a lot of stress and strain on my mental and physical health. I find that I spend much of my time in front of the computer. I eat more often, and I barely go outside. A friend suggested I adopt a dog to lift my spirits and get me motivated to go outside. Would I see any real benefits from this? Is there any connection between pets and our health?

ANSWER: Pets play a huge role in creating a healthy lifestyle. In fact, studies have shown that [pet ownership](#) can enhance [fitness levels](#), [lower blood pressure](#) and cholesterol levels, relieve stress, improve mental and heart health, and boost overall happiness and well-being. Evidence also suggests that connections to pets provide good social support—an important factor in helping you stick with new health habits.

One of the main benefits is that [dogs](#) force us to get up and move for routine and regular walks. A research study found that [dog owners](#) more likely report regular physical activity patterns, a healthy diet and ideal blood sugar levels compared to

those who do not own dogs. This is beneficial to your heart health because increased physical activity helps strengthen your heart muscles, making it more efficient in pumping blood throughout your body and improving overall heart health.

It's no secret that pets contribute to overall happiness. Owning a dog has even been linked to better [mental health](#) and less perception of social isolation—both risk factors for heart attacks. Dog owners have increased interaction with people, and are less likely to experience depression. This helps to diminish social isolation, which can reduce worse health outcomes and premature death.

Even just interacting with a dog has shown to increase levels of "feel-good" brain chemicals, such as oxytocin and dopamine. This creates positive, happy feelings and a great bonding experience for you and your pet. Pets bring a significant benefit to working from home. Over 50% of people surveyed said they would prefer if they could bring their pet to work.

There are four major ways pets can help with your mental health while working from home:

- Pets can reduce work-related stress. Two out of three employees say work stresses them out, and 40% say their job gets in the way of their health. Studies show that pets in the workplace reduce stress and improve employee satisfaction.
- Pets help manage anxiety. Up to 30% of the workforce could be working from home multiple days per week by the end of 2021, according to Global Workplace Analytics. So, now more than ever, people are struggling with mental health. Pets provide companionship and support.
- Pets help you be more active. Pets give us a reason to get outside, get some fresh air and get in some physical activity.

- Pets combat loneliness. The bond with pets helps people feel less alone. Owners can touch, see, hear or talk to their companion animals, which helps to bring joy and happiness.

Aside from your mental health, owning a pet—a canine in particular—can significantly help your heart. This is the finding of a Kardiozive Brno 2030 study, which looked at the association of pet ownership—specifically dog ownership—with cardiovascular disease risk factors and cardiovascular health, in part due to the increase in physical activity.

While walking a dog around the neighborhood may not always sound so enticing, don't forget to look for ways to incorporate your furry friend into other activities. If your neighborhood has a local dog park, it's a wonderful way for your dog to let off some steam while you make friends with other canine owners.

Consider also that you can hop in the car with your pet and have a picnic elsewhere. Bring healthy snacks for both of you. In warmer months, venture out to a nearby beach or lake. You can run or walk on the shore, chase balls, and swim. There is always something to be said for getting exercise outdoors and having a companion.

Owning a dog is a big decision that takes a lot of responsibility, but there are countless mental and physical benefits. Consider getting a pet to help you be more active and socially connected, while also improving heart [health](#) and promoting a healthy lifestyle.

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