

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Alan Cranton, DC, ND

## Pet Ownership Boosts Health

*If you're a pet lover, your furry friend may be providing you much more than companionship: He or she may actually be adding years to your life! How? By improving your physical and mental health. Doctors of chiropractic, like Dr. Cranton, focus on the connection between the mind, body and spirit when it comes to maximizing well-being. For many people, pet ownership enriches all three aspects of wellness.*



Dr. Cranton is concerned about the rampant use of blood pressure and cholesterol-lowering drugs, both of which have potentially serious side effects. Pet ownership, on the other hand, is an all-natural alternative to drugs: a perfect complement to the *chiropractic lifestyle* philosophy of disease prevention.

### Emotional Health

The following are just a few of the many ways pet ownership enhances emotional health:

#### *Provides Unconditional Love*

Animals never cast judgment over their owners. Instead, they readily and happily provide something humans often can't: unconditional love. Dogs, in particular, "are unconcerned with age or physical ability. They accept people as they are. This alone causes many to reach out and interact with

dogs." (*J Psychosoc Nurs Ment Health Serv* 2006;44:17-20.)

#### *Sparks Socialization*

A random survey of 339 adult residents in Perth, Western Australia, showed that pet ownership is positively associated with social contact and interaction "and with perceptions of neighborhood friendliness." Pet owners were also more involved with their communities than non-pet owners. "Social capital is another potential mechanism by which pets exert an influence on human health," noted the researchers (*Soc Sci Med* 2005;61:1159-73).

Scientific research indicates that people who are more involved socially in their communities are less likely to suffer from a vast array of emotional — as well as physical — ailments.

#### *Creates Extended Family*

Studies indicate that the majority of pet owners regard their fluffy, furry and feathery friends as family members: enhancing a supportive, emotional connection (*Soc Work* 2006;51:257-68).

Dr. Cranton believes this unique relationship is particularly important for older patients overwhelmed by feelings of isolation and despair — especially for those residing in nursing homes.



"Illnesses, separation from family, fear, loneliness, and even depression may be lessened for those who receive a therapy dog visit by providing a welcome change in routine and something to look forward to. Individuals are often more active and responsive during and after a visit." (*J Psychosoc Nurs Ment Health Serv* 2006;44:17.)

#### *Reduces Stress and Drug Use*

Extensive research shows that owning a companion animal reduces stress and depression while increasing coping skills. Pets have also been associated with "decreased psychotropic medication usage." (*Am J Hosp Palliat Care* 2004;21:285-8.)

Psychotropic drugs, warns Dr. Cranton, alter brain function: resulting in temporary changes in perception, mood, consciousness or behavior. "Treatment with certain antipsychotic medications is associated with metabolic adverse events that can increase the risk for metabolic syndrome and related conditions such as pre-diabetes, T2DM [type 2 diabetes mellitus] and cardiovascular disease." (*Can J Psychiatry* 2006;51:480-91.)



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## Physical Health

Pet ownership also boosts physical health. Animal companions:

### *Encourage Exercise*

Researchers at the National Center for Infectious Diseases say pet ownership increases the opportunity for human exercise, outdoor activities and socialization.

A Canadian study involving 1,054 participants supported the fact that pet owners are actually “more physically active than non-pet owners.” (*J Amer Geriatr Soc* 1999;47:323-9.)

This is particularly true for dog owners. An Australian study published earlier this year states that evidence suggests that “dog ownership produces considerable health benefit and provides an important form of social support that encourages dog owners to walk.” (*Health Place* 2007;13:261.)

### *Promote Intestinal Health*

Another Australian study reveals that living in a household with a dog or cat is associated with a 30 percent reduced risk of childhood gastroenteritis. This condition is sparked by an inflammation of the stomach and intestine, resulting in diarrhea, vomiting and cramps. Fever may also be present (*Epidemiol Infect* 2006;134:926-34).

But what about other animals? The Australian researchers found that zoo animals did not provide the same protective effect against gastroenteritis. But a new study reveals that “petting zoo” or farm animals do.

According to an article published in the August issue of *Pediatrics*, contact with farm animals in infancy decreases the risk of irritable bowel syndrome “compared with infants who are not in contact with farm animals.” People with IBD typically have one of two specific disorders: Crohn disease [inflammatory disorder affecting the digestive tract] and ulcerative colitis.

The study included 444 children with Crohn disease, 304 children with ulcerative colitis and 1,481 children

without IBD (irritable bowel syndrome). “Regular contact with farm animals slashed youngsters’ risk of developing IBD in half.” (*Pediatrics* 2007;120:354-61.)

### *Diminish Dermatitis*

From 1995 to 2001, researchers in Japan surveyed allergic diseases among 35,552 6-year-olds. In addition to finding no significant relationship between the prevalence of asthma and pet ownership, they discovered that cat ownership was related to a significantly lower prevalence of atopic dermatitis and allergic rhinitis (*Pediatr Allergy Immunol* 2006;17:22-8).

Atopic dermatitis is a skin disorder characterized by itching, scaling and thickening: most commonly affecting the face, elbows, knees and arms. Allergic rhinitis, a condition resembling a chronic cold, is often referred to as “hay fever” — despite the fact that “hay” or “fever” is rarely a factor.

### *Provide Early Warning*

Evidence also shows that animals, particularly dogs, can “serve as an early warning system for certain types of underlying ailments including cancer, oncoming seizures and hypoglycaemia.” (*Br J Health Psychol* 2007;12:145-56.)

Among a group of 29 seizure-prone patients who owned dogs, nine reported their pets engaged in “helping” behavior during the seizure. Three also reported that their dogs alerted them *prior* to the onset of seizure.

“Seizure-alerting/responding behavior of the dog did not appear to depend on its age, gender or breed,” noted researchers. The success of these dogs, however, “depends largely on the handler’s awareness and response to the dog’s alerting behavior.” (*Seizure* 2003;12:115-20.)

### **Defining Your Parameters ...**

Before dashing off to the animal rescue shelter or pet shop, take time to research your options: particularly when it comes to dogs. Canine considerations should include breed, tem-

perament, your activity level, the size of your home and age of your children.

Also, beware that carrying large, elderly or ill pets can spark low-back pain and misalignment of spinal bones (vertebrae), resulting in a condition known as **vertebral subluxation**. Although chiropractors use safe, gentle maneuvers known as **chiropractic adjustments** to realign vertebrae, ownership of a large pet may trigger a chronic situation.

And if you — or any member of your household — has allergies, asthma or other medical conditions, talk to your doctor before welcoming a pet into your home.

### **... And Finding the Perfect Pet!**

Thanks to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), more than 100 animal shelters across the United States are now matching potential owners with pets!

The Meet Your Match program has increased pet adoption and reduced the rate of returned animals, according to an Aug. 23, 2007, article in *USA Today*. Dogs, in particular, are often returned due to personality and energy-level issues. Meet Your Match, however, is muzzling that trend. In this program, prospective pet owners complete an 18-question survey indicating everything from previous pet experience to lifestyle.

To learn more about the ASPCA and whether your local animal shelter participates in the Meet Your Match program, go to [www.aspca.org](http://www.aspca.org).

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