

THE PET Rx

Let's hear it for puppy love—the companionship of a furry friend may just be the best medicine around.

ILLUSTRATION BY BENJAMIN FLOWW



NO DOUBT YOU ALREADY appreciate all the wonderful ways pets can improve your life. But did you know they just might have a big impact on an essential part of your overall well-being: your heart's health?

In fact, in 2013, the American Heart Association (AHA) issued a statement that pet ownership,

especially of dogs, is likely to be associated with a decreased risk of cardiovascular disease and increased survival rates among those who are already afflicted. "What we don't know is whether pets directly cause this phenomenon or if pet owners are just healthier to begin with," says Glenn N. Levine, a professor of medicine at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston and

chair of the committee that authored the statement. Yet there's persuasive science indicating that pets do indeed have a positive effect, in more ways than one.

▶ A Boost to Your Physical Health

When the AHA reviewed the data relating to heart health among pet owners—including studies by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health—several findings were clear. "People who had pets, especially dogs, tended to be a little healthier overall, have lower levels of obesity, and have lower blood-pressure and cholesterol levels," Levine says. All those factors lower your odds of developing heart disease.

One possible reason? People who own dogs walk more than those who don't. The AHA cited one study that found dog owners were 54 percent more likely than non-dog owners to meet the recommended amount of daily physical activity. A recent study in the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* found that roughly 60 percent of canine owners walk their dogs on a regular basis (at least four times a week) and average 160 minutes a week.

But even besides the increase in exercise, it seems that just being around your dog—and all that unconditional love—can help lower blood pressure and your risk of cardiovascular disease. "Dogs blunt your response to stress," says Levine, adding that it's possible cats offer similar benefits (pending further studies).

▶ A Boon for Your Psyche

Heart health isn't just dependent on your physical condition—your emotional well-being also plays a key role, and your dog may help to improve that.

Start, for instance, with social support. Pet owners tend to meet new people and make new friends more quickly than others, according to a study presented at the 2013 International Association for Human-Animal Interaction Organization Conference. Not surprisingly, dog-walking was a common way of initiating these relationships. The heart connection? "People who have had a heart attack and have strong social networks suffer fewer complications and do better overall," says Michael S. Fenster, an interventional cardiologist in Tampa, Florida, and author of *The Fallacy of the Calorie* (Köehler Books, 2014).

Pets might even give you a happiness high. According to research from the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, pet owners report feeling greater self-esteem and more joy, and being less fearful than non-pet owners. Pets also help ward off depression, another risk factor associated with an increased risk of heart disease, Fenster says.

So the next time you're having to bundle up for a brisk walk at the crack of dawn—and trudging through rain or snow, no less—remember this: It's not just your dog that benefits. You're also getting an extra dose of heart-healthy companionship. —Karen Asp

