

Why Man's Best Friend is Man's Best Friend

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My goal in life is to be as good of a person as my dog already thinks I am.
~Author Unknown

For over 15,000 years dogs have worked to earn the distinction of being "man's best friend." Dogs have not only offered love and affection, but worked side-by-side with their human counterpart for centuries. A vast assortment of studies have been conducted to research the physical, emotional, and social benefits of canine companionship.

Physical benefits of dog companionship

- **Increase longevity after heart attacks.** Dog ownership increases the odds for survival in persons who have had a heart attack from 1 in 15 to 1 in 87.
- **Lower cholesterol and triglycerides.** 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.
- **Decrease blood pressure and reduce stress.** Studies of people undergoing stress tests or physical examinations have demonstrated that the presence of a dog lowered their heart rate and blood pressure during testing.
- **Increase physical activity and functioning.** People who own pets often have better physical health due to the need to exercise and care for their pets.
- **Reduce medical appointments and minor health problems.** 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.
- **Predict seizures.** Some people who have periodic seizures have reported that their dogs can sense the onset of a seizure before they can. Now it has been found that dogs can be specially trained to recognize some type of change prior to a seizure, and signal the owner of the imminent seizure. These dogs are called 'seizure-alert' or 'seizure-response' dogs, and can be trained to signal their owners from 15 to 45 minutes prior to a seizure.
- **Alert to hypoglycemia.** There are also animals who alert their owners to episodes of hypoglycemia (low blood sugar), which allows the owner to correct the level before serious symptoms develop.

Emotional benefits of dog companionship

- **Adjust to serious illness and death.** Children often turn to their pet for comfort if a friend or family member dies or leaves the family. Grieving adults who did not have a close source of human support were also found to have less depression if they had a pet.
- **Be less anxious and feel safer.** Pet owners tend to feel less afraid of being a victim of crime when walking with a dog or having a dog in the home.



- *Relax and reduce everyday stress.* Pets can help us relax and focus our attention away from our problems and worries.
- *Have physical contact.* This ability to have something to touch and pet is very important. More and more studies show how important touch is to our physical and emotional health.
- *Lift our mood and feel less lonely.* Pets decrease our feelings of loneliness and isolation by providing companionship to all generations.
- *Have something to care for.* Everyone needs to feel needed and have something to care for. Many elderly citizens or people living alone will tell you their pet gives them a reason for living.
- *Keep active.* Having a pet can help us remain more active. We may not only get more exercise from walking a dog, but we also increase our activity through feeding, grooming, and otherwise caring for our pet.
- *Have consistency.* Pets provide some consistency to our lives. Caring for a pet can significantly affect our routine and gives us something to do and look forward to each day.



Social benefits of dogs

- *Create a sense of closeness and well-being.* Families surveyed before and after they acquired a pet reported feeling happier after adding a pet to the family.
- *Offer a topic of conversation.* A study in a veteran's hospital showed that the residents had more verbal interactions with each other when a dog was present in the room than when there was no dog present. Dogs were also shown to increase socialization among persons with Alzheimer's disease in a Special Care Unit of a nursing home.
- *Promote interaction.* Residents in long-term care facilities were more likely to attend activity sessions when an animal was going to be present.

Is there any wonder that the bond which began more than 15,000 years ago still exists today? Dogs have an extraordinary affect on many aspects of the human condition. Their ability to act the clown, be non-judgmental, help us feel needed, offer unconditional love and trust, provide an ear to our troubles, and warm fuzzy fur to hold and stroke ensures them the well-deserved title of "man's best friend."