Health benefits from pets often go unnoticed

By Michael Johnson

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Most households in the United States have at least one pet and the interactions with that pet typically lead to a higher level of physical activity, lower stress and happiness according to the Centers for Disease Con-

That health comes through many channels. The actions of walking a dog, petting a cat or riding a horse have all shown to deliver different health benefits.

Here is a look at some of the benefits of having a pet a part of your everyday or even occasional interactions with

More physical activity, better cardiovascular health

A California study of over 41,000 people showed that those owning a dog walked an additional 19 minutes per week. The study, which appeared in the Journal of Physical Activity and Health, showed that people that did not own dogs were more likely to walk to work. However, the pet owners participated in more leisure walking, and more overall walking, which supports the association between dog ownership and physical activity. Walking behaviors of cat owners were similar to non-pet own-

Just how much do dog owners walk? According to an Australian study released in 2013, which looked at a five year span, 60 percent of dog owners walk their dogs. Those that walk their dogs walked a median duration of 160 minutes and four times a week.

The Centers for Disease Control, notes pets can share some nasty germs with us including zoonotic diseases that can make people sick. However, the CDC also says, when proper precautions are taken, pets can help decrease blood pressure, decrease cholesterol levels, decrease triglyceride levels, decrease feelings of loneliness and increase opportunities for exercise and outdoor activities. Some of which are a boost for those suffering from a number of mental illnesses.

According to a study published by the National Center for Biotechnology Information, pet ownership contributed to long term survival of post myocardial infarction patients.

"In one of the first evaluating studies the health benefits of pets, one-year mortality among coronary heart disease patients was significantly lower for pet owners than for non-owners," the study findings showed.

Can alleviate symptoms of mental illness

study That same included 460 patients and took into account the mortality. "Not only was pet ownership associated with decreased mortality after adjusting for the effects of depression, but also the effect of pet ownership tended to moderate the effect of depression on mortality," the study noted. "Pet ownership may be particularly beneficial to depressed post-myocar-

dial infarction patients." In an article by E. Paul Cherniack, MD and Ariella R. Cherniack, the authors discussed how pet ownership may not be appropriate for all patients with mental illness, but animal-assisted therapy may support mental health.

"Several investigations have implied a benefit for children with autism or developmental disorders, and for children who have been abused," they wrote. "Dogs enhanced communication skills in 40 children with developmental delay beyond that in the presence of toys, and the children showed greater environmental awareness. Riding horses for 24 weeks improved behavior ratings in a group of 20 children with autism. Animal-assisted therapy decreased traumatic symptoms in 153 children who had been sexually abused.

"In addition, animals may alleviate symptoms in adults with mental illness. In several small case series and self-controlled studies, patients with cognitive and mental impairments showed less behavioral disturbance or greater social-

effects of depression on ization behaviors in the presence of animals."

Social benefits

In another study, titled "The Pet Factor - Companion Animals as a Conduit for Getting to Know People, Friendship Formation and Social Support," involving study groups in Australia, Tennessee and California, companion animals like dogs and cats were catalysts for several dimensions of human social relationships outside of the socialization between human and pet.

"Pet owners were significantly more likely to get to know people in their neighborhood than non-pet owners," the authors wrote. "Among pet owners, dog owners in the three U.S. cities (but not Perth) were

significantly more likely than owners of other types of pets to regard people whom they met through their pet as a friend. Around 40 percent of pet owners reported receiving one or more types of social support (i.e. emotional, informational, appraisal, instrumental) via people they met through their pet.

Is a pet right for you?

Casey Barton Beh-ravesh, Director of CDC's One Health Office National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases and veterinary epidemiologist, told the Huffington Post, there are important questions to consider before getting that pet. "Do you have time to properly care for and clean up after the pet? What does the pet

eat? What type of habitat or environment does the pet need to stay healthy? How large will the pet get and how much exercise will it need? Do you have young kids or other higher risk individuals at home? Do you or anyone in your family have a chronic illness or a weakened immune system? What is the pet's life span and are you committed to caring for the pet for its entire life? How much will veteri-

nary care cost?" Those are all important questions to ask yourself before getting into what can be a major commitment. You need to be prepared to have your life changed.

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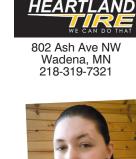
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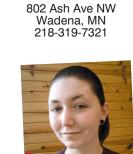
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