Are Companion Animals the Secret to Good Health?

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Introduction

- People usually keep pets for companionship, recreation and protection rather than specifically for enhancing their health.¹
- Studies indicate that companion animal ownership is beneficial to physical, psychological and social health.²

Aims

- To summarise the health-related aspects of companion animal ownership
- To identify ways in which general practitioners can encourage patients to improve their health and wellbeing by interacting with their pets.

Methods

- A review of the literature was conducted to explore the relationship between pets/companion animals and health.

Findings

- Pets may provide a range of health benefits to their owners (see Figure 1)
- Improved health and wellbeing related to pet ownership reduces the use of healthcare services³
- GPs may integrate patient-pet interaction into self-management plans – e.g., walking the dog
- In clinical settings, companion animals decrease stress experienced by autistic children; and increase rapport between practitioner and child
- Determining the level of pet attachment and interaction facilitates discussion about health and lifestyle
- Understanding a patient’s attachment to their pet(s) may also explain why they may be reluctant to seek help if they fear separation from their beloved pet.

Conclusions

- While it is not appropriate to recommend or ‘prescribe’ the purchase of a pet, encouraging patients to increase the quality of interactions with their pet may improve their physical, psychological and social health and wellbeing.


References


Figure 1. Health-related benefits of companion animal ownership

Physical Health
Cardiovascular: reduce stress, lower BP
Physical fitness: lose weight, improve general health

Psychological Health
Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT): increase morale in Alzheimer’s patients; increase social skills in ADHD children
Mental health: reduce loneliness, depression; reduce stress of major adverse events in the elderly
Child development: improve social-emotional development of children; increase trust, self-confidence, safety

Social Health
Catalyst for meeting people; increase social opportunities
Positive correlation with family cohesion
Improve social interaction for the elderly and Alzheimer’s patients