

WELLNESSMONTHLY

Pets, People and the Happiness Quotient | April 2023



Pets, People and the Happiness Quotient

Millions of people have a soft spot for pets, and they may be healthier and feel more happy as a result.

Pet ownership is associated with unconditional love, loyalty, companionship, entertainment (even fish can be fun), service and security. Children who care for pets learn about responsibility. Interactions with pets are associated with decreases in cortisol (a stress-related hormone), better mood, lower blood pressure and less loneliness, which is linked to anxiety, depression, and poor fitness and nutrition.

However, in the [Power of Pets](#), the National Institutes of Health reports that research on the mental and physical health effects of pet ownership are mixed. More than a dozen studies have found that pet owners are not any happier than people who do not live with a companion animal, Hal Herzog, Ph.D., reports in a *Psychology Today*

post on the [Puzzling Relationship between Pet-Keeping and Happiness](#).

According to Herzog, University of Tennessee investigators found “a clear association of pet ownership and positive mental health” in 17 of 54 studies. In six of 21 studies Herzog reviewed, pet owners were less lonely; in five of 30 studies they were less depressed than non-pet owners. He theorizes that a psychological process called hedonic adaptation – the tendency for humans to return to a stable baseline after experiencing either a major positive or negative event – may be a factor.

When the joy associated with getting a kitten or a rescue dog wears off and life returns to normal, enthusiasm can wane. In addition, pet-related social activities, veterinary care, food, training, insurance and other potentially costly and time-consuming responsibilities can become a burden.

Still, Lots of People Have Pets

During the COVID-19 pandemic, pet adoption rates increased dramatically as people found themselves cooped up at home. In 2021, an [American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals® \(ASPCA®\) survey](#) with 5,020 respondents found close to one in five households had acquired a cat or dog, accounting for about 23 million American households. A 2022 survey of 2,000 U.S. adults conducted by OnePoll for [Forbes Advisor](#) found that 78 percent of pets were acquired during the pandemic.

While some COVID-era pets have since been “rehomed” or relinquished to shelters and rescue centers, the ASPCA says most owners have kept them. This finding is reinforced by the Forbes Advisor survey: two-thirds of respondents said they spent more money on their pets than usual to help them adjust to being alone after COVID restrictions were lifted and their owners weren’t home as much.

Did You Know?

- *On any given day, there are an estimated 79 million homeless dogs and cats in the U.S.*
- *Animal shelters take in about 6 million homeless animals a year.*
- *In 2022, 4 percent more animals entered shelters than left them, 2 percent more than in 2021.*
- *About 25 percent of animal shelter intakes are attributed to owner relinquishment.*
- *Companion animal over-population can be prevented with spaying and neutering.*

Sources: [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals](#); [Washington Post](#)

Health Awareness

Furry friends can introduce health risks such as dander allergies, injuries from scratches and bites, and fleas and ticks into a home. Here are some tips to help reduce pet-related health risks for children and adults:

- Wash your hands thoroughly after contact with animals.
- Keep your pet clean and healthy; keep vaccinations up to date.
- Supervise children when they're interacting with animals.
- Do not kiss pets and don't let small children put animal toys in their mouths.

- Avoid changing litter boxes during pregnancy. (Problems with pregnancy may occur from exposure to toxoplasmosis, a parasitic disease spread through the feces of infected cats.)
- Behavior-train dogs and be cautious when using a leash to prevent joint injuries and falls.

Here are some tips to help reduce health-related risks for pets:

- Keep your pet lean and healthy by feeding it a high-quality diet with fresh water every day.
- Be consistent with training, feeding times, vet checkups, vaccinations and dental care.
- Give cats and dogs opportunities to exercise but don't let them roam unsupervised.
- Prevent consumption of substances, plants and foods that are poisonous for animals.

The ASPCA and the Animal Poison Control Center (APCC) reported in March 2023 that recreational drugs, including marijuana-based products, hallucinogenic mushrooms and cocaine, made the top 10 on its annual list of pet toxins for the first time, knocking gardening products from the tenth spot. In 2022, the APCC team assisted more than 400,000 animals. It has managed a 300 percent increase in calls over the past five years. To help prevent poisoning, refer to [Potentially Dangerous Items for Your Pet](#), a U.S. Food and Drug Administration resource.

Heartwarming Pet Stories

Real-life stories about the physical and mental health benefits of pet ownership abound. Here are few examples:

- *A woman who lived alone felt isolated and struggled to manage her weight. After getting a dog, she shed pounds and developed friendships with neighbors while taking him on walks.*
- *A military veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder experienced a renewed sense of purpose after adopting an abandoned cat. Now he has two cats and volunteers at a community animal shelter.*
- *A frail elderly patient's vital signs and attitude improved when she was allowed to pet and hold therapy animals trained for hospital and nursing home visits.*
- *When their parents got divorced, a young brother and sister were allowed to take their two hamsters with them when they switched households, offering a sense of security and normalcy.*