

Having a dog can have a positive impact on your health

BY CAROL CARIDAD



When you adopt a dog and give them a loving home, you're also giving them a chance at a healthier, longer life; but the ways in which they return the favor may surprise

you. You'll see it in the way they greet you when you come home after a long day at work or in the way they'll keep you company as you read a good book. You'll also see the benefits of owning a dog in a very important part of your life — your health.

Studies have shown that owning a pet can improve a person's health in a variety of ways, from reducing stress and blood pressure to promoting cardiovascular health and a more active lifestyle. In addition to improving their owner's physical states, dogs play a huge role in emotional health by improving their owners' moods and promoting social interaction.

Dr. Marta Lista of Trial Animal Clinic has noticed the affect that pets have on owners of all ages, from children to the elderly.

"Children have a really tight bond with the pet; they help boost their self esteem and help teach them about responsibility," she says. "With elderly people, the pets provide a lot of companionship. It gives them protection and a lot of structure because the pets have to be fed at certain times, walked, taken out. That helps them with stress and loneliness, too."

Recent research conducted at the Center for Animal Wellness at the University of Missouri found that stroking dogs releases hormones such as serotonin, prolactin and oxytocin, which improve people's moods by helping them feel better and more at ease. Another study conducted on a group of New York stockbrokers found that those who had dogs were more likely to have lower blood pressure and lower heart rates than those who did not.

When it comes to getting your heart rate up for exercise, though, dog owners also have the upper hand, or paw. Owning a dog encourages people to get outdoors and exercise, whether it's for a



short walk or a jog around the park. We've all had days when we just didn't feel like going to the gym, but research has shown that dog owners get more exercise than non-dog owners for the simple reason that dogs need regular exercise.

"At the clinic I'd say about 25 percent of pets are overweight, so we encourage the dog owners to exercise their pets," Lista says. "That's a way to make people healthy, too. They love their dogs and when you tell them to do it for their pet, they're getting exercise, too. That helps them to reduce cardiovascular disease and improve their sense of well-being."

For example, a 20-minute walk five times a week produced an average weight loss of 14 pounds in participants of another year-long study, though most dogs require a little more exercise. To take care of both your needs, 30 minutes a day is ideal.

But it's not only your heart rate that benefits from those walks. Dog owners have more social interactions with other owners because they already have something in common, their dog.

Oftentimes while on a walk owners will introduce their pets to other pets as a way to socialize them. They are also creating opportunities for themselves to socialize with others, which is an important factor in emotional health.

PET OF THE WEEK

Spanky is a beagle/hound mix who is just an all around fun dog. He is under a year old, neutered and up to date with all his vaccines. Go to the website for more information and to fill out an adoption application: <www.paws4you.org>. His foster mom can set up a one-on-one meeting to see his awesome coloration in person!

Carol Caridad is president of Paws 4 You Rescue. She may be contacted by calling 786-242-7377, by addressing email to <carol@paws4you.org> or by visiting <www.paws4you.org>.