

THE LONG RUN

Animal attraction

Hold them. Love them. Grow old with them. Research suggests owning a pet could make you healthier.

By Kay Lazar, Globe Staff | April 20, 2009

Have you hugged your cat today? It may sound like a bumper sticker slogan, but the answer could have much to do with your health, and perhaps even your longevity.

A growing body of medical research suggests that people who own or interact regularly with animals may be healthier than people who don't.

One study found that cat owners are less likely to die of a heart attack than non-cat owners. Others point to how pet interaction may help protect against allergies, asthma, and even some kinds of cancer. One recent study suggests that smokers who are told that second-hand smoke harms their pets become more willing to quit -- for their pet's sake.

Once considered fringe science, the intriguing bond between pets and people is now receiving front-and-center attention from no less than the National Institutes of Health, the government's lead agency for medical research. The NIH just formed a public/private partnership with MARS, the world's largest maker of pet food, to fund and encourage research on the timeless bond.

"Pets are so ubiquitous they get overlooked, so we don't even think of researching them," said scientist James Griffin, deputy branch chief at NIH's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Until now. Griffin, who is leading the agency's pet initiative, said there are many small studies and much anecdotal evidence of improved health among cancer patients, autistic children, and others after interacting with animals. But healthcare specialists, he said, need large-scale, controlled studies to determine whether the role animals play in human health is pivotal and, if so, how that healing power may best be tapped. He is working to make that happen.

In the void, researchers from a wide variety of specialties have been cobbling together disparate pieces of data, often with private funding.

Neurologist Adnan Qureshi, executive director of the Minnesota Stroke Initiative at the University of Minnesota, combed through reams of information from nearly 4,500 men and women, aged 30 to 75, who took part in a long-running government health and nutrition survey. He discovered that cat owners were 40 percent less likely to die from heart attacks than non-cat owners.

They were also less likely to die from all cardiovascular diseases - including strokes. The findings held true, he said, even when the researchers took into account other heart disease risk factors, such as age, weight, gender, race and ethnicity, smoking, and cholesterol levels.

Dog owners, take note: canine companionship didn't appear to convey the same health benefits.

Qureshi is mystified by the potent feline factor, but said that since he first presented his findings last year at an international stroke conference, he's heard lots of theories from pet owners.

Some suggest that a cat's unique and soothing purring may be the key. Others say it's a matter of the owner's personality, not the cat itself: Cat owners contend that "people who own cats tend to have easy going and accepting personalities because cats don't go by anyone's vision, they do what they want,"

Qureshi said. Dog owners, on the other hand, tend to be more controlling, and thus prone to unhealthy anxiety, the theory goes.

Qureshi, who is planning a follow-up study, said he's not quite ready to prescribe cat ownership for his stroke patients, but he's "getting there."

In California, researchers recently found that people in the San Francisco area who reported ever having owned a pet had about a 30 percent lower risk of developing non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the body's blood-filtering tissues, compared with non-pet owners. The longer they owned a pet, the more protection they appeared to have.

Earlier studies have linked pet ownership during infancy with a reduced risk of asthma and allergies, because that exposure to pet dander is believed to desensitize the body toward later contact. Now, the California researchers theorize a similar chain of events with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Many of the latest findings do not surprise Dr. Alan Beck, a pioneering researcher who now heads the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University School of Veterinary Medicine. For more than two decades, Beck has scrutinized the relationships between people and their pets and has found, more often than not, measurable benefits.

"Our relationship with animals often changes our behavior in a positive way," he said.

Recently, Beck has found that the presence of a fish tank helps focus the attention of Alzheimer's patients who tended to pace and wander at mealtime; having the fish tank in the dining area makes it more likely malnourished patients will sit and eat, he said. The fish tank was a less invasive, and certainly cheaper approach, he concluded, than other methods previously used.

Registered nurse Rebecca Johnson, an aging specialist who heads the Research Center for Human Animal Interaction at the University of Missouri, has found that dogs are far more likely to inspire elders to stick with a walking program than two-legged walking companions.

Seniors were paired with either a shelter dog or another elder for a taxing, five-day-a-week program that spanned 12 weeks. In the end, seniors walking with a dog walked 28 percent farther than they had before the study. Those walking with a spouse or friend only showed a 4 percent improvement.

"The human companions actually discouraged each other and we heard it day in and day out," Johnson said. "But the dogs were always ready to walk," Johnson said. The seniors were "committed to walking the shelter dogs because they wanted to help them and in so doing, they had a dramatic increase in walking speed."

Officials agree more must be known before pets become a part of mainstream medicine, but those conducting the required research face some hurdles, starting with a lack of basic data. "The US Census," notes the NIH's Griffin, "does not collect information on pets, but they will collect information on how many TVs you have in your household."

There are also the usual funding problems, he said, as well as what might be considered a public relations problem:

"There has always been this question from researchers about whether they will be taken seriously at their university, that they are somehow playing with puppies and will NIH really fund a grant in this area," Griffin said. "And that's why we are trying to reach out and get the word out that, yes, we will."

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