

The Effects of Animals on Human Health and Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

Substantial sums of money are invested annually in preventative medicine and therapeutic treatment for people with a wide range of physical and psychological health problems, sometimes to no avail. There is now mounting evidence to suggest that companion animals, such as dogs and cats, can enhance the health of their human owners and may thus contribute significantly to the health expenditure of our country. This paper explores the evidence that pets can contribute to human health and well-being. The article initially concentrates on the value of animals for short- and long-term physical health, before exploring the relationship between animals and psychological health, focusing on the ability of dogs, cats, and other species to aid the disabled and serve as a "therapist" to those in institutional settings. The paper also discusses the evidence for the ability of dogs to facilitate the diagnosis and treatment of specific chronic diseases, notably cancer, epilepsy, and diabetes. Mechanisms underlying the ability of animals to promote human health are discussed within a theoretical framework. Whereas the evidence for a direct causal association between human well-being and companion animals is not conclusive, the literature reviewed is largely supportive of the widely held, and long-standing, belief that "pets are good for us."