

Health

Why PETS are PURR-FECT for our health

We all know pets bring us joy, but can they make us live longer?

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Whether it's walking your pooch in the fresh air, cuddling up to a feline friend or watching your fish swim, we know that pets make us feel good.

But research shows that our companions aren't just an additional member of the family, they could actually boost our health and, therefore, our lifespan.

Vet and award-winning author Dr Margit Muller explains how animals could be the key to a



Dr Margit Muller

long and healthy life.

Pets prevent loneliness

At a time when we're spending more time indoors, caring for our mental health is crucial. Social support is needed for wellbeing, and that can come from our furry — and not so furry — friends. Pets enable us to get to know people, promote and maintain friendships, and reduce feelings of worthlessness and depression.

Dr Muller says: 'A whopping 89 per cent of participants in a survey said that interaction with pets helped reduce their loneliness, while 90 per cent said their pets helped to improve their mood. This highlights the importance of pets for both our mental health and social needs.'

They reduce anxiety

As well as giving us a hit of the 'love hormone' oxytocin, interacting with a loving pet produces a significant reduction in the stress hormone cortisol, which

in turn eases anxiety. Pets also make for the best listeners and are often the perfect distraction for a busy mind.

Dr Muller says: 'Even in extreme situations, like before surgery, spending time with animals can help reduce anxiety levels by 37 per cent.'

Pets can lower blood pressure

It goes without saying that 'walkies' increase our level of physical activity and make our heart stronger. But countless studies have correlated owning a pet with lower rates of blood pressure and heart disease, meaning our adorable animals could even help us live longer.

Dr Muller says: 'Our pets can help reduce mortality from cardiovascular disease by one quarter. A study revealed that after a heart attack, only three per cent of dog owners had died compared with 28 per

cent of non-dog owners.

'Even our risk of stroke is diminished. Our pets, especially dogs, can literally be life-savers.'

Pets boost your immune system

Ever watched a YouTube video of animals chasing their tails or yelping along to music? Witnessing the bizarre antics of our four-legged friends is a sure-fire way to make us laugh and, luckily for us, the saying 'laughter is the best medicine' is true. Laughter triggers healthy physical and emotional changes in the body, in turn strengthening our immune system, increasing energy and diminishing pain.

Dr Muller says: 'Pets are such great immune system boosters. If children are exposed to them early on, pets can help reduce allergies and asthma. They're even helpful for controlling blood glucose levels in diabetic people, especially teenagers.'

They can improve cognitive function

Owning a companion bird encourages social interaction, which can be



You can email the health editor Zoe Pinks at tab.heartbeat@bauermedia.co.uk

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hugely beneficial if you live on your own or want to keep your mind sharp. Talking to a bird or teaching it new phrases or tricks can promote healthy cognitive function.

Dr Muller says: 'Simply caring for another living being increases our ability to process thought and retain information. Even watching a fish in its tank can make a real difference by increasing attention span and focus in seniors and Alzheimer's patients.'

Pets increase mindfulness

Whether it's walking your dog, taking a trip to the vet's or just visiting the shops to buy pet food, our beloved animals pull us away from screens and push us into the real world. And, unlike many of us, pets don't dwell on the past or worry about the future, so owning one can help us appreciate the joy of just 'being'.

Dr Muller says: 'Pets help us to be more sociable, infuse enthusiasm into our lives and bring out the best in us. They help us find a meaningful role and purpose and provide us with routine — all of which promote a clear and calm mind.'

*Edited by
Julia Sidwell*

• Dr Margit Muller's book, *Your Pet, Your Pill*, is available from Amazon.



READ it

Using illustrations, clinical psychologist Dr Emma Hepburn shines a light into the neglected corners of your brain. From identifying what triggers unhappy thoughts, to overcoming the fear of making mistakes, *A Toolkit for Modern Life* will help you to cultivate positive habits and feel more confident, happier and more in tune with yourself. Available from Blackwell's, priced £9.25.

