

# The Pet Prescription

New ways to unleash your animal's healing power

BY Hannah Wolt

**L**ower blood pressure, less risk of heart disease, reduced anxiety: The number of scientifically proven health benefits of pet ownership is rising faster than the number of chew toys strewn around your house. These health pluses aren't just the result of the extra exercise you get walking your dog or playing hide-and-seek with your cat. The bond that you and your pet develop is also part of the equation. "Owning a pet gives you a sense of



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purpose and belonging that can increase feelings of positivity and lower stress levels, all of which translates to health benefits," says Allen McConnell, PhD, a psychology professor at Miami University who studies human-pet interaction.

The research proves it. In a study at the State University of New York at Buffalo, women asked to solve a math equation with their dogs nearby experienced less stress than women who worked near a human pal. **"When you interact with a friendly animal, your blood pressure lowers and your muscles relax,"** explains Stanley Coren, PhD, a psychology professor and neuropsychological researcher at the University of British Columbia who has published nine books on the connection between people and animals.

On a chemical level, owning a pet may also decrease levels of cortisol (a stress hormone that can damage your body) in your blood and raise levels of the feel-good brain chemical dopamine, meaning you'll feel better emotionally—you'll be happier and more positive. To maximize your pet's health-boosting powers, don't just vent your troubles aloud to your animal—reach out and pet him. People who pet dogs experience an uptick in immunoglobulin A, an antibody that bolsters the immune system.

It's not just the feel of soft fur that calms us: Stroking a pet snake can bring down its owner's blood pressure and heart rate, according to a study in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*. "People forget how important touch is—it can establish love and comfort," says Dr. Coren. Research shows that people who interact with animals experience a boost in levels of oxytocin, the hormone that promotes love and trust and is linked to reduced blood pressure and heart rate. Regularly playing with your pet helps too. "Play, such

*"A pet gives you a sense of purpose and belonging."*



as challenging your pet to find a hidden toy, helps build the bond between owner and pet and brings you closer," says Kate Perry, a certified dog trainer and the author of *Training for Both Ends of the Leash*.

Establishing an emotional bond with your pet, as you would with a family member or friend, also pays a health bonus. It's actually better for you to think of your animal as a furry person. **"People get more physical and psychological benefits the more they anthropomorphize their pets,"** Dr. McConnell says. So if you've always wanted to throw your cat a birthday party, here's license to start planning your celebration! And invite some of your human friends: Studies also show that people with social support from pets or humans are more likely to survive heart disease. ●