

THE BENEFITS OF SHARING YOUR LIFE WITH A PET

If you're lucky, a pet will come into your life, steal your heart and change everything.

THE WONDERFUL CONNECTION THAT PEOPLE SHARE WITH ANIMALS

Whether you are coming home from a long hard day at work and your pets greet you with a jump for joy and kisses to match, or you are lying in bed and they hop up beside you, snuggle in and make you feel like everything is going to be okay, there is no doubt that the bond that exists between humans and their pets is simply wonderful. And there are so many benefits to having a pet, especially if you are a cancer patient.



PET OWNERSHIP THIS YEAR

This year alone, 1.2 million pets live with someone newly diagnosed with cancer.

WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

Exercise. Studies have shown that exercise has huge benefits for cancer patients. And one of the easiest ways for “pet parents” to get their exercise, every day, is to take their pets for a walk.

According to the Mayo Clinic, the benefits of exercise are two-pronged. There are the more obvious benefits to your physical health, but exercise can also help your attitude, which is vital for people with cancer. Exercise is important before, during and after your cancer treatment. For example, dog walking several times a day will help you get up and out, but it will also give your dog somewhere to channel their energy.

Always discuss your exercise plan with your health care team, but once you get the all-clear, get out your pet's lead and then get out and get active.

Stress management. Everyone gets stressed, but how you manage that stress is what matters most. And your pet can be an ideal way for you to decrease your stress levels throughout the day.

There have been many studies showing the beneficial effects pets have on reducing stress levels. One of those studies showed that human companions who are faced with stressful tasks or life events are less likely to have spikes in their heart rates.

Having chronic stress can put anyone's health at risk but especially people undergoing cancer treatment. Living with a pet can help reduce your cortisol levels. Cortisol is the main stress hormone, and when it is elevated, it can negatively affect your immune system. Having your pet by your side can even lower your blood pressure, so never underestimate the power of that special bond with your pet. Stroking your pet can help control your cholesterol levels, too.

Emotional support. Caring for your pet can give structure to your day, but a pet's effects run much deeper than that. Pets are your friends and can be ideal companions. They help you deal with the emotional challenges of cancer and their love is unconditional.

Living with a pet can lower your levels of loneliness, increase feelings of social support and boost your mood, too. As an example, bringing a dog for a walk on a regular basis is not only exercise but also a social outing, which may lessen the feeling of anxiety and isolation. Studies have shown that there is a huge difference between going for a walk on your own and going with your dog with respect to allowing you to interact with other people.

Some final thoughts. Clearly pets have many benefits, but is it safe to own a pet if you are a cancer patient? Yes, as long as you take the correct precautions. Talk to your health care provider team and ask them any questions you may have. (See also CancerCare's "Suggested Questions to Ask Your Health Care Provider Team"). Except in certain circumstances, you should be able to maintain that wonderful bond between you and your beloved pet.



The CancerCare® Pet Assistance and Wellness (PAW) Program

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. The financial assistance component of the CancerCare PAW Program has helped over 1,300 clients keep their pets in their homes.

This fact sheet is for people living with cancer and caring for their pets and it includes important information for them and their loved ones, as well as health care professionals and veterinarians.

For additional information please visit www.cancercare.org/paw or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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