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UNDERSTANDING PET CARE AND ITS IMPACT ON YOUR HEALTH

The American Pet Products Association reports that two-thirds (66%) of U.S. households own a pet. Dogs are the most popular, followed by cats and freshwater fish. Not only are pets a great companion, but they can boost an owner's health and overall well-being. Humans and animals can have a true symbiotic relationship.

This article explores proper pet ownership, how to stay healthy and safe around pets, and the link between pet health and personal well-being.

Taking Care of Pets

Pets bring new responsibilities for owners—and part of that is knowing how to take care of the animal. To ensure your pet's optimal health and happiness, consider these pet care tips:

- **Select proper food.** Dietary needs vary for pets based on the type of animal and age. For example, puppies require different food than senior dogs. Like humans, pets may also have special diets (e.g., gluten-free, grain-free and vegetarian) and nutritional needs. Improper feeding can lead to health issues (e.g., skin problems, malnutrition and obesity), and some human foods and plants are even toxic to animals. A vet can advise on a pet's ideal diet.
- **Provide 24/7 access to water.** Pets always need access to clean and fresh water to stay hydrated and healthy. Hydration can lead to organ failure and potentially death. If pets live in water, such

as fish or turtles, cleaning aquariums and tanks regularly is important so the pets don't get sick. A contaminated tank can disrupt the balance of the ecosystem and harm the pet.

- **Designate a safe, cozy shelter.** Most pets need protection from extreme temperatures and weather conditions, so they shouldn't be expected to live exclusively outdoors. Provide the pet with an appropriate environment to retreat to and feel safe. For example, cats may want a covered bed indoors.
- **Socialize them early on.** Pets can benefit from socialization, so it can be advantageous to get them out of the house or have guests over. For dogs, it's important to socialize puppies with different sights, sounds, places and people and reinforce positive experiences. Many owners overlook behavioral issues, so it's critical to address any problems right away so they don't worsen.
- **Exercise them regularly.** Movement is important for your pet's mental and physical health. Misbehavior is often a result of boredom when pets are left alone. A walk or exercise can be an opportunity to socialize with the pet further.



- **Build healthy habits.** Maintaining routine wellness checkups, vaccinations and teeth cleanings is important. Some pets also require regular grooming to stay happy and healthy. Many owners often neglect dental health, but this could result in periodontal disease and lead to tooth loss or systemic diseases. Similarly, if nails grow too long, they could cause health and mobility issues.

Many necessities that people need to survive and stay healthy are the same that animals need. A veterinarian can provide pet care guidance and recommendations.

Staying Healthy Around Pets

Everyday activities that are part of caring for your pet can spread germs from pets to people. Handling pet food and toys, cleaning cages and kissing a pet can pass germs from the pet to you. Keep in mind that pets can spread germs even if they look clean and healthy.

The risk of getting a disease from a pet is low for more people, but some groups are more likely to get sick from the germs that pets spread. Those groups include young children, older adults, people with weakened immune systems and pregnant women.

One of the best ways to prevent the spread of germs or diseases is to practice good hygiene. Hand-washing can help people stay healthy around pets and protect themselves against diseases. As such, hand-washing is important after playing with, feeding and cleaning up after a pet. Pets can contaminate surfaces in the home with germs, which means owners may pick up illnesses that way as well. It's best to keep pets away from food and areas where food and beverages are prepared, served, consumed or stored. Proper hand hygiene is key to keeping animals and humans healthy.

Staying Safe Around Pets

Animals can feel stressed just like humans, so it's important to understand the signs of stress in a pet and know when not to approach them. A common sign of chronic stress is reduced appetite, increased digestive problems or lethargy. Dogs may growl, whine, bark or pace when stressed out, and cats may excessively scratch, groom or vocalize. Pets can also sense an owner's stress levels and take on any anxious feelings. If

something seems off about a pet, it's best not to dismiss it; address the triggers and take extra care of them.

Furthermore, a pet can help young children learn about compassion and responsibility, but they should be supervised while interacting with animals to ensure safety for all. Remember to teach children to wash their hands immediately after playing with animals or touching pet belongings (e.g., food and water dishes, beds and cages). Children are often the victims of bites and scratches and are more likely to get ill from pets.

Understanding the Link Between Pets and Well-being

The unconditional love of a pet can do more than offer companionship. Consider these benefits of owning a pet:

- **Stress relief**—Being in the physical presence of an animal can decrease the stress hormone cortisol, lowering your blood pressure and helping you feel less stressed.
- **Boosted immunity**—Pets can help lower blood pressure and the risk of developing allergic reactions (e.g., asthma and eczema).
- **Routine management**—Routines are good for humans and animals alike. The nudge to wake up and take care of a pet is good as it gets you going for the day and keeps the routine on track. Also, putting something or someone before you can provide a physical and mental boost.
- **Increased socialization**—Pets become companions, so developing more connections and socializing with others is beneficial. Animals can help an owner be more social and reduce loneliness. Going out in public with a pet often leads to more human connections.
- **Active lifestyle**—Adults need at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity each week, and pet ownership can help people get moving. Movement not only supports physical health but also mental and emotional health. It can reduce anxiety, depression and negative moods. Physical activity is good for your mind and body—and your pet, too.

While these benefits focus on pet ownership, service animals can offer the same advantages. Service animals are trained to provide support for people with certain disabilities or conditions. This type of animal companionship can help those people feel less alone, guide them through outings or accomplish critical tasks.

Summary

Proper pet care is the core of responsible pet ownership. Pets depend on their owners for their health and well-being. It comes down to providing the basic necessities of life (e.g., food, water and shelter) and offering opportunities for exercise and socialization. In return, pet ownership can positively impact owners' physical, mental and emotional wellness. Pets can provide owners with a sense of belonging, happiness and connection.

Talk to a veterinarian if you have questions about a pet or how to select the right animal companion for you.