



## PET SMARTS

They can make you happy, keep you fit, even lower your blood pressure. Find out why owning a dog or a cat is a prescription for good health.

### THEY HELP YOUR HEART

»Simply petting a dog or a cat can lower your blood pressure. Stroking a snake works, too, one study found—but probably only among people who own snakes! “Holding a pet triggers a relaxation response,” explains Alan Beck, Sc.D., director of the Center for the Human–Animal Bond, at Purdue University. “It helps you stay focused on the present, as opposed to dwelling on the past or worrying about the future.” And cuddling with furry friends

can give you a chemical boost by releasing the feel-good brain chemicals serotonin and dopamine. Pet owners also tend to have lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels, according to a study published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

### PETS BOOST IMMUNITY

»Sick as a dog? Maybe it's time to get one. Petting a dog can up your levels of immunoglobulin A, an antibody that fights off the common cold, according to a study at Wilkes University. It's likely a result of that “man's best friend” thing, says James A. Serpell, Ph.D., director of the Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society at the University of Pennsylvania. “We know that social support—or a lack of it—directly affects the body's immune system and impacts our resistance to infections and disease.” A companion who acts as if it's Christmas morning every time you walk through the door? Now *that's* a support system.

### THEY TEACH YOUR KIDS TO BE NICER PEOPLE

»Boys and girls who live with pets are more empathetic and social than kids who don't, according to a Croatian study. And allowing boys to take responsibility for feeding, walking and grooming a dog lets them practice nurturing skills that girls typically develop while playing house, explains sociologist Clinton R. Sanders, Ph.D., author of *Understanding Dogs: Living and Working With Canine Companions*.

### YOU'LL BREATHE EASIER

»Pets cause some folks to sneeze, to be sure. But people who grow up with a pet are less likely to have allergies and asthma later on, Swedish researchers say. Other studies have similar

**63%** ... of all households in the United States have at least one family pet. Fur real!

findings. One explanation? Early exposure to allergens—dirt, pollen and pet dander—helps create a stronger immune system. One more reason to cave when your kids ask for a kitten!

### YOU'RE FORCED TO STAY FIT

»Having a dog means you've got no excuse to blow off your daily stroll. Dog owners tend to be in better shape than people who don't have a pet to walk, says Beck. But don't just take his word for it. "I lost a little over 30 pounds by walking my dogs every day for an hour—rain, shine, 106 degrees or 35 degrees," says reader Carol Fallows Collyer, from Colleyville, Texas.

### THEY KEEP YOU SAFE

»Dogs can calm down even the biggest scaredy-cat. People worry less about being attacked when they have a canine companion, say researchers from the University of Cambridge. And bigger isn't necessarily better. With its super-sensitive sense of sound and smell, even a small dog can tell you when something's not quite right.

### PETS HELP YOU FEEL LESS ALONE

»Are you one of those people who tells her troubles to her cat? Turns out that you're not nuts—you're normal. Fifty percent of adults and 70 percent of children confide in their pet, according to Beck's research. Having a pet also helps children deal better with the death of a parent, says a study from Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. You develop a sense of companionship, whether your pet is a dog, a bird or a fish, says Colin Jerolmack, Ph.D., an assistant professor at New



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(So don't worry,  
you're not a  
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natural conversation starter, Dr. Jerolmack says. But dogs tend to take it a few steps further. Since they don't have the same social inhibitions as humans, they can literally drag you into

York University, whose research focuses on animals and society. "You start developing particular routines and rituals with each other and get drawn into a relationship, which can make you feel as though you're not alone."

### YOU MAY MEET NEW FRIENDS

»Any kind of pet is a

encounters. For most of us that simply means getting to know the neighbors a little better. But for Melyssa Peters, 35, a real-estate agent in Los Angeles, California, it was truly life changing. After checking out a cute guy at her local dog park, she used their dogs as an excuse to strike up a conversation. "I started talking to Rob about his dog and our relationship began with long walks around the neighborhood," she remembers. "Three years later we were married."

### PICTURE-PERFECT PETS

Do you think your animal pal is grade-A adorable? Enter our cutest pets contest! Upload photos at [LHJ.com/cutestpets](http://LHJ.com/cutestpets)

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