

## Pets and mental health



Ever find yourself watching animal videos online during a tough day? Does just seeing a photo of puppies make you smile and feel a little less stressed?

If you're like many people, being around animals – your own pets, others' pets or even the little birds and animals you might see in your neighbourhood – could help you feel calmer or more positive. Here's what the science says about the effect that pets have on people:



### **Pets can help us feel better emotionally**

For some people, having a pet can help with feelings of loneliness, depression, anxiety and symptoms of trauma.<sup>1</sup> Spending time with a pet has also been shown to decrease a stress hormone called cortisol.<sup>2</sup>



### **Pets are good for our physical health**

If you choose a pet that requires regular exercise like a dog, it can encourage you to get outside and be active. Playing with and walking pets can lead to decreased blood pressure and lower cholesterol levels.<sup>1</sup>



### **Kids may benefit from having a family pet**

Pets can help teach kids responsibility and compassion.<sup>1</sup> Studies with kids who have ADHD or autism spectrum disorder have found that they gain benefits from spending time with animals, including having better social skills, sharing and cooperating more, and feeling calmer.<sup>2</sup>

## Thinking about getting a pet?

Getting a pet is a big decision, and it's important to think through all the costs and responsibilities. Consider how big the pet will get, how long it's likely to live and how much space it needs. Think about the costs of food and veterinary bills. Make sure you have the time to care for and clean up after the pet, too.<sup>1</sup>

If you've decided that getting a pet is right for you, think about which type of pet fits your lifestyle. Dogs, for example, need to be let outside frequently and walked. Cats need their litter boxes changed regularly – something pregnant women should avoid doing.<sup>1</sup> And reptiles and amphibians aren't recommended for families with kids under age 5 because they can spread harmful germs.<sup>1</sup>

While dogs or cats might be the first ideas that come to mind, smaller pets can have a positive impact on our lives, too. For example, one study showed how playing with guinea pigs helped lower children's anxiety levels.<sup>2</sup> Watching fish in an aquarium may also positively affect our wellbeing.<sup>3</sup>

---

**Furry (or scaly) friends can provide comfort, companionship and fun, especially on our most stressful days. But remember that while having a pet can be helpful, it's not a replacement for therapy.**



## Want to spend time with animals without the commitment?

Having a pet isn't right for everyone, but we can all experience the benefits of spending time with animals. If you're longing for some cuddle time or a game of fetch, try these ideas:

- Offer to house-sit for a friend or family member who has a pet.
- Ask your neighbours if you can walk their dogs.
- Volunteer at a local animal shelter.
- Look for 'cat cafés' or other businesses that allow you to interact with animals.

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. How to stay healthy around pets. [cdc.gov/healthypets/keeping-pets-and-people-healthy/how.html?CDC\\_AA\\_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fhealthypets%2Fhealth-benefits%2Findex.html](https://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/keeping-pets-and-people-healthy/how.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fhealthypets%2Fhealth-benefits%2Findex.html). Last reviewed September 15, 2021. Accessed March 10, 2022.

2. National Institutes of Health. The power of pets. [newsinhealth.nih.gov/2018/02/power-pets](https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/2018/02/power-pets). February 2018. Accessed March 10, 2022.

3. Clements H, Valentin S, Jenkins N, et al. The effects of interacting with fish in aquariums on human health and well-being: A systematic review. *PLOS ONE*. doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0220524. July 29, 2019.

This programme should not be used for emergency or urgent care needs. In an emergency, call the local emergency services phone number or go to the nearest accident and emergency department. This programme is not a substitute for a doctor's or professional's care. This programme and its components may not be available in all locations, and coverage exclusions and limitations may apply. Optum® is a registered trademark of Optum, Inc. in the U.S. and other jurisdictions. All other brand or product names are trademarks or registered marks of the property of their respective owners. Because we are continuously improving our products and services, Optum reserves the right to change specifications without prior notice. Optum is an equal opportunity employer.