



NUTRITIONALLY SPEAKING

Dogs (and cats) support optimal health

A few months ago, and a couple of years after our last dog, Poppy died, my wife Donna went to the animal shelter and brought home our new family member: cat-friendly, 8-year-old Emma. We have two cats, so it was important to find a dog that is cat-friendly, and Emma had passed that test. As older folks, we thought to adopt an older, more mellow dog – which Emma is by the end of a day of walks, playing and training. Yikes!

Having a dog on the household filled an empty space for both of us, even if the jury is still out for the kitties. And don't get me wrong, the kitties have important roles in our lives (Violet is on my lap as "we" write this) and we love them dearly, but a dog fills a bigger heart space for me, and possibly for Donna as well.

As a newly retired person, I now have more time to spend at home with my two- and four-legged family members, and I feel an extra level of relaxation as a result. There are many documented health benefits we garner from having pets – especially dogs – and here are my top 10:

■ **Dogs don't just fill your heart with love and joy;** studies show that having a canine pal is linked

to lower blood pressure and healthier cholesterol and triglyceride levels, resulting in overall better cardiovascular health. Dog owners who experience a heart attack have a higher survival rate as well.



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■ **Dog owners are typically more fit and active.** In our home we have an extra couple of walks daily since we adopted Emma seven months ago. We can easily get the 2.5 hours of weekly exercise that health experts recommend.

"People love to be outside to walk their dog and be with their dog," says Kay Joubert, director of companion animal services at PAWS, a Washington-based animal advocacy organization. "It helps them to be more active". And this activity time helps us be more mobile into our 70s and 80s. A recent study in the journal Gerontologist found that older adults who walked their dogs experienced "lower body mass index, fewer activities of daily living limitations, fewer doctor visits, and more frequent moderate and vigorous exercise."

■ **Looking to drop a few extra pounds?** Daily dog walks help us to lose weight, since you are nudged to do 10, 20 or even 30 minutes of walk-

ing each time. A 2010 study showed that public housing residents who walked "loaner" dogs five times a week lost an average of 14 pounds over the course of a year; the participants also suggested that they did not consider this exercise, but their responsibility to the dogs: "They need us to walk them."

■ **As we age, and especially during our Pacific Northwest rainy season** we don't get out as much to meet folks. Researchers have found that 40% of dog owners make friends more easily, possibly because the vast majority speak and connect with other dog owners during walks.

Dog owners tend to be a little more extroverted or outgoing," says Joubert. "When you start to engage them about their companion animal, people tend to open up and really blossom. They want to share stories about their favorite friend."

■ **Spending time with our pets can support** a lower anxiety and stress level, often resulting in lower blood pressure. Our pet activities support increased levels of serotonin and dopamine – two feel-good neurotransmitters that play a role in our feelings of calmness and wellbeing. People performing stressful tasks do better with their dog around, and, wait for it ... studies show that dogs ease tension at the

office and between married couples!

■ **As we get older, especially after we retire,** it can be a challenge to find structure and meaning for our lives day in and day out. In our case, we have the goal of a couple of dog walks a day, we like being out in nature, especially in fall with its colorful vistas. Having Emma, who is always ready for a walk, adds some incentive for us to get out of the door. No matter how we are feeling, physically or emotionally, getting out for that walk offers dividends.

■ **Having a dog can help prevent depression.** Raise your hands if you get a bit down during the gloomy fall and winter seasons? It is widely believed that dog owners are less prone to SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) and the accompanying depression, and therapy dogs – animals that do not stay in your home – have been shown to be effective in easing depression for a variety of people, old and young, sick and

healthy.

■ **In the past, experts believed that having a dog** in the house caused children's allergies. Recent research has taught us that the opposite is true: Dogs and cats actually can lower a child's potential to become allergic by up to 33%, according to a 2004 study published in the Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology. These kids may even develop a stronger immune system!

■ **If you are over 65 and own a pet,** odds are you seek medical help around 30% less often than folks without pets. A study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology determined that pet-owning seniors on Medicare "reported fewer doctor visits over a one-year period than respondents who did not own pets" and "Owners of dogs in particular were buffered from the impact of stressful life events on physician utilization."

■ **And finally, it is believed that owning a dog can help detect**

and manage a variety of illnesses and debilitation. Some have been trained to sniff out skin, kidney, bladder and prostate cancer. Service dogs support folks with traumatic injuries and support increased mobility and independence. Alzheimer's patients are soothed by their canine companions, mitigating those bouts of emotional flare-ups and aggression.

So, If you are contemplating inviting a dog into your family, you will be able to look forward to these benefits as described above. There are many small nonprofit rescue groups among us in our area, as well as Greenhill Humane Society. Salud!

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Greenhill's Pet of the Week: Lorna

Meet Lorna!
This 1 year old black and brown tabby is Lorna! She loves to be loved! Lorna loves to sit on her companions lap and be pet all day. She enjoys playing with feathery toys, window watching and taking a cat nap. A volunteer described her as "sweet, loves head rubs and deserves to be a queen!" Lorna can be nervous in a new environment so she needs a home that will be patient and give her time to adjust. Once she is relaxed and comfortable she loves to be the center of attention! Lorna needs a cat free home where she can get lots of love. This pretty lady is very deserving of her forever family to fall in love with!

If you are interested in adopting a cat or would like to learn more about adding a cat into your family, please visit [Greenhill Humane Society](http://GreenhillHumaneSociety.org). Greenhill Humane Society is open for adoptions seven days a week, 11 am – 6 pm at 88530 Green Hill Rd in Eugene. For more information call (541) 689.1503 or visit www.green-hill.org.

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