

Healthy ageing & lifestyle

Fact Sheet No.13

The benefits of keeping a pet

People tend to refer to themselves as a cat person or a dog person, but you can be both and often our decisions on pet ownership are determined by our individual circumstances. There is an estimated 10 million dogs and 8 million cats in the UK at the present time, with feline owning households tending to keep more than 1 cat at a time.

Which pets are most suitable if you are living with a disability?

Cats
Dogs
Birds
Fish
Rabbits (house)

Why do some animals play such an important part in our lives?

Dogs have shared our lives for thousands of years and in various capacities, carrying out work such as herding and guarding livestock as well guarding humans, military duties, aiding the police, pest control, working as assistance dogs and simply for companionship. Such are the advances in modern science that dogs can now be used to detect medical conditions in humans such as epilepsy, with the very real prospect of saving their owner's life.

In the domestic environment animals will often display the characteristics and instincts for which they were originally bred e.g. Collie dog breeds may try to round up people or objects, while cats will bring vermin or birds into the house; and expect praise for doing so!

The bond between you and your pet is like any other bond and the strength of feeling people develop can be very strong. These bonds will be enhanced further by close contact with your pet during training, exercising, grooming and playing games.

What are the health benefits of keeping a pet?

Physical

- Can help to lower blood pressure
- Release of the 'feel good' hormone oxytocin, (associated with bonding and cuddling) especially when stroking your pet
- If you have a dog and are able to exercise it yourself there are many potential health benefits e.g. exercise helps to keep your weight steady, strengthen the cardiovascular system, improve lung function and improve bone health.



Mental

- Can help to reduce anxiety
- Helps to combat loneliness
- Regular exercise can be beneficial to your mental health, lifting your mood and enhancing your self-esteem while helping to reduce depression, it may also help to regulate sleep patterns
- Offers unconditional love
- Distraction therapy e.g. watching fish swimming in a tank or listening to a budgie chatting.

Social

- Companionship, especially if you don't have children or grandchildren, a pet can help to fill what you might feel is a void in your life
- Giving you something to talk about
- Meeting people with similar interest

Sadly, our pets have a much shorter lifespan than we do and when the time comes to say goodbye to this much-loved member of the family the grieving process, feelings of sorrow and loss, can be overwhelming. Grief is of course a normal process and you should never feel apologetic about how the loss has affected you.

Before purchasing a pet

A certain amount of homework and research needs to be done by prospective owners; perhaps most importantly, from who and where you purchase the pet. Unfortunately, there are some unscrupulous breeders and traders out there and it is not always obvious, even if you visit their premises. Word of mouth is often the best recommendation.

Top Tips

Your checklist:

- **Is the type of pet you have chosen to share your life with suitable for your lifestyle?**
- **Can you dedicate the necessary time needed to the pet's specific requirements?**
- **Can you afford the costs of keeping a pet, including food and bedding, veterinary bills and insurance?**
- **Do you have enough space to give the pet an optimum quality of life?**

If you purchase a pet and it subsequently becomes obvious the pet is not suitable for you, this may result in the pet needing to be rehomed; which will no doubt be a distressing experience for you, and probably the animal too.

There are of course downsides to keeping a pet; as discussed in the above checklist.

You also need to take into consideration whether you or any members of the household or regular visitors suffer fur or feather allergies or have a fear of dogs. If you become ill and cannot look after your pet, is there someone close at hand who can help out? If you go on holiday and need to use a kennel or cattery it can be at considerable expense.

Overall, most people consider the advantages of keeping a pet by far outweigh the disadvantages, and there is usually a way to overcome any obstacles.

Disclaimer

The information and opinions shared on this website are based on my personal experience of working in the health sector and research I have carried out whilst writing articles; it is of a general nature and should not be used as a substitute for seeking medical advice. My aim is to ensure that this information is accurate and kept up to date, but you should always consult the appropriate healthcare professionals if you have a concern about your health.

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