

6 Incredible Health Benefits of Having a Dog



We all know dogs make our lives better, but did you know they make you healthier, too? From cardiovascular fitness to mental stability, dogs provide a whole lot more than tail wags and cuddles and the health advantages of dog guardianship are not limited to people who have a four-legged best friend at home. Just look at animal-assisted therapy programs in prisons, schools, and hospitals: almost everyone can benefit from a little one-on-dog time. Read on for six surprising health benefits of being a pet parent.

Dogs improve your mood

Numerous studies have shown that having a pet can lessen the symptoms of depression and help pet parents maintain a positive, optimistic outlook.

As author and animal expert Karen Winegar noted in a 2009 interview with the [New York Times](#), “The human-animal bond bypasses the intellect and goes straight to the heart and emotions and nurtures us in ways that nothing else can.”

Of course, this is something us dog guardians know without needing a study to tell us: just think how many times your dogs has sidled up to comfort you while you cry, or made you laugh out loud in the midst of a difficult time.

Animal companionship can be an important, even life-saving component of self-care for people experiencing depression and other mood disorders.



Dogs reduce stress

In addition to helping your overall mood, dog guardianship has a measurable impact on stress levels. Consider this 2012 story about office workers in North Carolina who showed significantly lowered stress levels when they were allowed to [bring dogs to work](#).

Spending time with an animal increases your level of the hormone oxytocin, often referred to as the “love hormone,” a neurotransmitter that increases trust and reduces fear. Oxytocin helps you and your dog bond with each other and relax, so petting your dog isn’t just pleasant, it’s physiologically beneficial to you both ([source](#)).



Dogs are good for your heart

And not just because of the lovey-dovey feelings they elicit when you gaze into their eyes. According to the American Heart Association, owning a pet, particularly a dog, can help lower your risk of heart disease in large part because having a dog causes you to be more active, and physical activity is the best thing for your heart ([source](#)).

Dogs also help improve heart health by being loyal, loving companions. In a 2009 study conducted at the UCLA Medical Center, heart failure patients who came in contact with therapy dogs for 12 minutes a day demonstrated notably reduced blood pressure, heart rate, and anxiety.

As the lead scientist for the study notes, “Dogs are a great comfort. They make people happier, calmer and feel more loved,” all of which lead to overall better health.

Dogs keep you moving



Dogs need exercise, and for many of us, walking the dog is an important part of our own fitness routine. It’s not just your cardiovascular health that benefits from a few brisk walks every day.

Regular dog walks can also improve your muscle tone, bone health, flexibility, and lung capacity. Several studies have shown that dog parents who regularly walk their dogs get more exercise per week than non-dog-people, and are more likely to meet the federal criteria for regular moderate or vigorous exercise ([source](#)).

Of course, not everyone maintains the activity levels they and their dogs need to stay healthy. To harness the most physical benefit for you and your dog, you should take at least one 30-minute walk, or two brisk 15-minute walks, per day.

Dogs keep you social

An added bonus of all that dog walking is the increased social interaction it provides. A healthy mind depends on engagement with others. In a study published in the British Journal of Health Psychology, head researcher Mary Wells noted that dogs “facilitate the development of social contacts, which may enhance both physiological and psychological human health” ([source](#)).

I can't count the number of times I've stopped to chat with a fellow dog walker or person who admires my dogs while we're out walking, and as someone who works alone from home most of the time, these social connections are essential to my well-being.

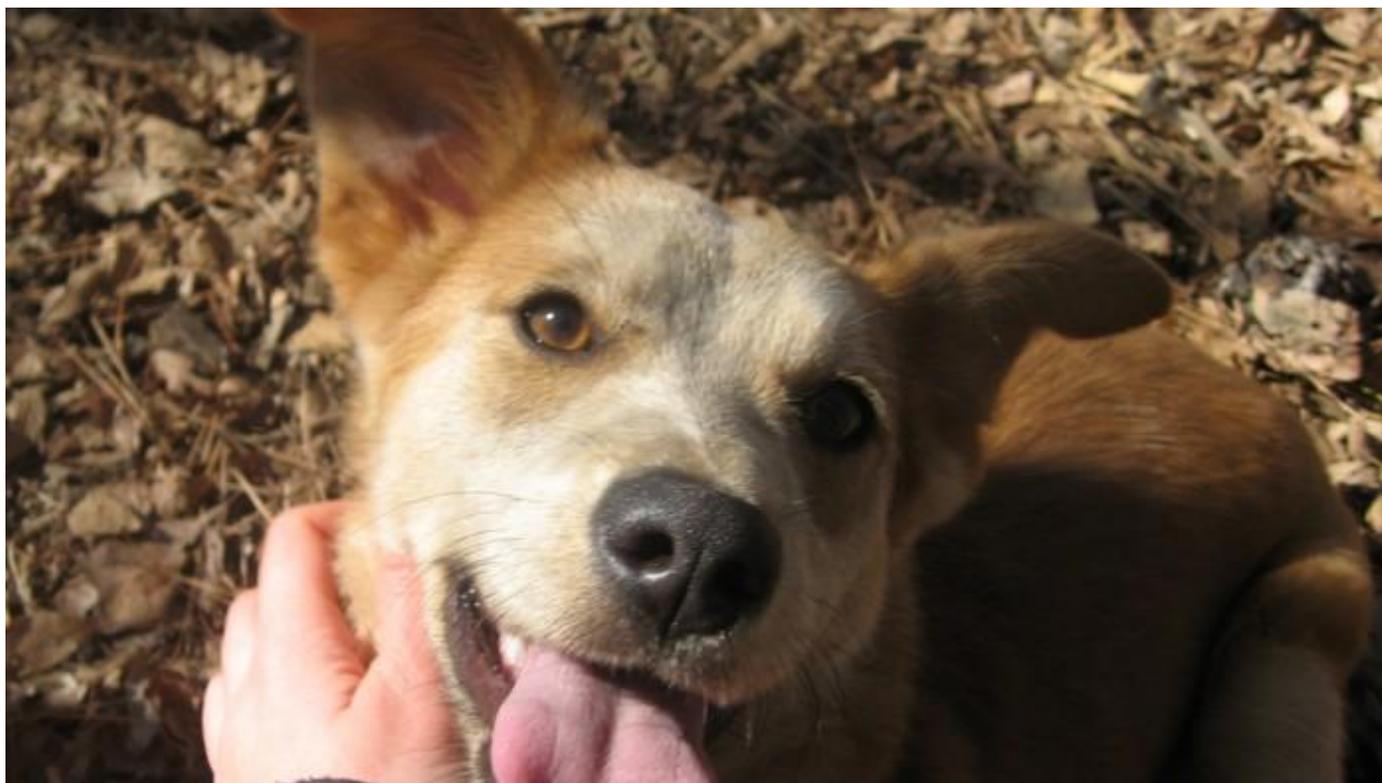
Next time you chat up an acquaintance at the dog park, remember, you're not just passing the time, you're also improving your health.

Your dog just might save your life

Dogs are incredible companions, and in addition to helping us stay active both mentally and physically, some have the ability to alert us to serious health risks.

Dogs can be **trained to alert diabetic people** to dangerous changes in blood sugar levels; **warn epileptics** that a seizure is coming; and even **sniff out cancer** before a person demonstrates symptoms. Of course, medical alert dogs require special training and particular skill sets, but they speak to the overwhelming benefits of being a pet parent.

Dogs help us to be happy, healthy and all-around better people simply by being their best doggy selves.



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