

## Pets & Healthy Life Styles

Are people with pets healthier? Is there any benefit to having a pet? If you look at health care literature, you find some interesting and sometimes conflicting information.

At my home currently, we have 3 dogs.....Stussey a 13 year old mutt and the Christmas puppies- Annie Oakley and Pistol Pete. Do they make me live a healthier life style? Probably. The whining and carrying on by the leashes every evening upon my return from work means I am more likely to complete a walk on the days when I'm stressed and tired than I would without pets.

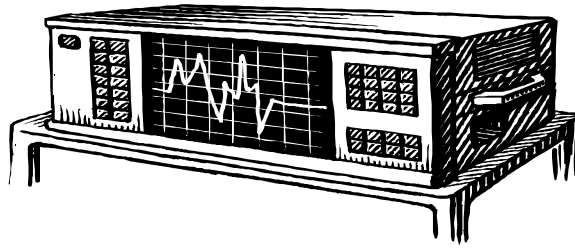


Pets have been in human lives since antiquity. Pets come in many shapes, sizes, species and breeds. It is estimated that approximately 60% of all homes have pets and almost all people will have some sort of a pet during their life times. Each owner finds a pet that “works” for them....dogs, cats, fish, rodents, lizards, birds, etc have put their marks on many a person’s heart strings. Several studies have show that a pet’s companionship is beneficial for elderly people who live alone (Cookman, 1996).

According to Brodie et all (1999), people with pets have better cardiac outcomes and lower cholesterol levels, triglyceride levels, and blood pressure readings than other cardiac peers in a matched group, there were less medicare office visits for minor problems in another study, and an overall improved sense of well being was noted in several studies. Other studies have found no correlation between pets and owner’s health.

Assistance dogs are trained as service dogs (assist people in wheelchairs or with other mobility issues), Assisted service dogs (work with children and/or adults with developmental disabilities where the supervision of a third party; is required), Facility dogs (work with professional caregivers in hospitals, hospices, nursing homes and other programs to improve the well being of those in their care), Hearing dogs (for the deaf and/or hard of hearing), and Guide dogs (alerts visually impaired person to obstacles and helps them navigate in public, seizure alert dogs and hypoglycemia unawareness dogs are all found in various health care settings and the home.

Companion dogs for epilepsy alerts and hypoglycemia unawareness alerts are more controversial. There are many anecdotal stories of strong relationships between dogs and assistance to individual owners. Scientific studies thus far have not been able to validate this role as statistically significant in controlled settings. Would you want to be the dog in an ICU type setting with monitors everywhere....trying to figure out what the heck was going on with your owner? Ortiz (2005) stated that the equipment may interfere with the seizure alert dogs ability to perceive the seizure. Ortiz also stated that patients with seizure dogs report fewer seizures than a similar cohort.



For both seizure alert dogs and hypoglycemia unawareness dogs, the dog's keen sense of smell is thought to be mechanism for warning. Some hypoglycemia alert dogs have been known to "lick" the skin of their master to confirm the olfactory sensations.

Sooooo.....should we, as diabetes educators, recommend pets? Perhaps. It has been often noted that people will do more for their pets than themselves sometimes.....mention the benefit to pets from maintaining ideal weights, exercise, and a proper diet....and you just might get a few "couch potatoes" on the road to beginning exercise. Walking with your dog is not always perceived as exercise by the owners. Before one decides to go out to find a pet, people should check resources for food, veterinary costs, and determine if they have both fiscal and time resources for the pet. Pets choices are also going to be based on the amount of room available for the pet.

As always, we will need to gather information about the patient's current pet status and beliefs regarding pets, assess the situation for appropriateness at this time, and make suggestions, e.g. "Have you ever thought about a pet in your home" or "Does your dog like to go for walks?".

Pets can be a rewarding part of one's life or a challenge. (At my house this can occur on the same day...or even the same hour!!.....Did I tell you about the hole in my carpet!!!!). Check out the Internet and other professional literature. Talk to peers who utilize handi-dogs of various types. Encourage patients to do the same search prior to acquiring a pet. On the popular front, pets are winning, and the verdict is still out on the scientific side.

## **References**

Brodie, S. & Biley, F. (1999). An exploration of the potential benefits of pet-facilitated therapy. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*. 8(4), 1999 July.

Ortiz, R. & Liporace J. (2005). "Seizure-alert dogs": observations from an inpatient video/EEG unit. *Epilepsy & Behavior*. 6(4):620-2, 2005 June.

Cookman, C. (1996). Older People and Attachment to Things, Places, Pets, and Ideas. *Image-the Journal of Nursing Scholarship*. 28(3):227-31, 1996, Fall.

Websites (with related information)

[www.allpurposecannines.com](http://www.allpurposecannines.com)

[www.dosgs4diabetics.com](http://www.dosgs4diabetics.com)

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