



Lewis County Public Health & Social Services

Health Beat

June 2019

Pets Are Good for You

by Rachel Wood, M.D., MPH, Lewis County Health Officer

Research on human-animal interactions is still a fairly new science. Many studies have shown positive emotional and physiological health effects of pet ownership. Six out of 10 pet owners say their fur babies are members of their family. Whether science agrees or not, that indicates a strong, positive relationship.

According to the National Institutes of Health, an estimated 68 percent of U.S. households have a pet. While any time is a good time to rescue a shelter animal, our feline friends take center stage during Adopt-a-Cat Month in June. According to the American Veterinary Medicine Association, more than 74 million cats share space with their humans in 25 percent of U.S. households.

Cats can be great companions. Research shows cats provide emotional support as well as improve their human's morale. I remember fondly our black cat, "Thunder" from my teen years. He used to come "sleep in" with me on Saturday mornings, purring so loudly he sounded like thunder. Cats have also been found to promote socialization in older individuals and physically or mentally disabled people.

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, approximately 38 percent of U.S. households are home to about 70 million dogs. This is the highest rate of dog ownership the Association has ever measured.

The most obvious benefits of pet ownership are love and affection. Having a pet in your life has also been shown to decrease levels of cortisol, a stress-related hormone, and lower blood pressure. Animals reduce loneliness and boost your mood. Experts say people do best medically and emotionally when they feel attached to another, be it human, feline, canine, or some other mammal. The acceptance, unconditional love, and sense of purpose we get from our pets all generate positive impacts on our lives.

Activities associated with our pets offer physical benefits, too. Walking, playing with, and taking care of our pets get us out of our recliners, away from our cell phones and computer screens (pet peeve of mine), and on our feet.

If you are considering getting a pet for the first time – or a different species/breed of pet – be sure to give some serious thought to the following questions before adopting:

- How long will the animal live?
- What does it eat?
- How much exercise does it need?
- How big will it get?
- Do I have time to take care of all its daily needs?
- How is the animal or more generally the breed around children?
- Can people in the house be endangered by a pet because of age, pregnancy, weakened immune systems or allergies?

Along with the benefits of pet ownership comes some health risks. Steps you can take to reduce risks include:

- Washing hands thoroughly after contact with animals
- Keeping your pet clean and vaccinated
- Supervising children around pets. Try to prevent kids from kissing pets or putting their hands in their mouths after touching pets
- Avoiding the litter box if you are pregnant. Cats can carry a parasite that causes toxoplasmosis – a disease that if transmitted to the fetus can lead to mental retardation, seizures, blindness, and death.

The Lewis County Animal Shelter is a great place to look for your next pet. Most of the more than 1,000 animals adopted out each year are brought in by someone in the community. It may be a found, sick, stray, or injured animal, a family pet whose owner has passed away and has no one to care for it, or a pet that can no longer be kept by its family.

You can preview animals currently available on the shelter's Facebook page, stop by the Shelter at 560 Centralia Alpha Road, or call 360-740-1290. Shelter hours are Monday through Saturday between 10 am and 4 pm. Follow us on Twitter @LCPHSS.

#