

Cats and their owners: a recipe for health and happiness

Although owning a pet is usually regarded as simply a lifestyle option, there are times when it may be an important factor in issues concerning health professionals and their clients.

This review is designed to identify some of the benefits to health that are widely associated with pet ownership, and the times when owners may feel the need to consult the health care providers about matters relating to pet ownership and their own health. A number of advisory publications and research papers are given on page four.

Listed below are some of the most common occasions when pet ownership may become an issue.

■ **Pregnancy**

Most GPs and midwives will be accustomed to questions from their patients on the safety of owning a cat during pregnancy. A major study published in the British Medical Journal concluded that contact with cats is not a risk factor. However, there remains a common unfounded belief that pregnancy and cat ownership are incompatible, and many owners are deeply distressed at the thought of giving up their cat. Referring such owners to appropriate guidance on cat ownership during pregnancy gives practical advice and reassurance.

■ **Children**

Responsible ownership of a family pet can offer many benefits to a child's cognitive and emotional development. There is also evidence that growing up with a cat in the house may help protect against future development of asthma. However there is a need for sensible precautions to be put in place. Simple instruction and guidance on hygiene, and

reassurance that it is not irresponsible for families with young children to own pets can ensure that children and pets live happily and healthily together.

■ **Asthma/allergies**

Owning a cat or other pet need not be incompatible with living in a household where there is a sufferer of asthma or other allergy. Simple measures to minimise contact with pet allergens may reduce symptoms by up to 95 per cent, without giving up the pet, according to leading researchers at the University of Virginia. Since non-compliance with advice to give up a pet is very high, most owners wish to first try managing a pet-related problem before resorting to parting with a pet.

■ **Recovery from serious illness**

Pet ownership has been found to provide valuable emotional support that helps maintain psychological well-being during recovery from physical illness. A study of women recovering from breast cancer showed that ownership of a pet, and especially of cats, was associated with better psychological adjustment and physical recovery. These benefits can also be derived by people with reduced immunity provided that simple measures of hygiene in pet care are observed.

■ **Pet loss**

The death of a much-loved pet has been likened to a human bereavement and many of the symptoms of loss are similar. Some owners need the support and reassurance of health professionals at such a time. This can be especially true where the owner is elderly or alone.



Over half of UK households own a pet of some kind – cats being the most popular. With such a significant proportion of the population owning pets, it is important that health professionals are aware of how concerns about keeping a pet, or losing a pet, may become an issue for their clients in their own health care decisions.

For most owners, a pet is not simply an object or a possession, it is a relationship that brings pleasure, companionship and a sense of well-being. For many, a pet can be more important than some human relationships! This is not abnormal, simply a reflection of the closeness of some person-pet relationships.

Health benefits associated with pet ownership

The value of close human relationships to physical and psychological well-being has long been recognised. A growing body of research now demonstrates that relationships with pets can also give similar benefits.

Indeed person-pet relationships are believed to mirror many of the supportive elements of close human relationships known to help cope with emotional stress (1) and promote recovery from illness (2). There are many instances where pet ownership should be protected as a vital part of a person's health and happiness.

Research has found:

For adults

- Pet owners make fewer visits to their GP for stress-related illness (3)
- Pet ownership is associated with fewer minor illnesses (4)
- Pet owners have reduced risk for cardiovascular disease (5). This is not just a phenomenon of exercise gained through walking a dog, it even applies to cat owners!

For children

- Children born into cat-owning families have a lower risk for developing symptoms of asthma (6)
- Children brought up with pets have better immune functioning and take fewer days off school through sickness (7)
- Children regard pets as special providers of friendship and social support, independent of available human support (8). This may be especially important if the child is emotionally troubled.

Older people, and those with disabilities, may be especially dependent on their pets to alleviate loneliness. For these people, routines of pet care are frequently bound up in routines of self-care.

Although pet owners may not be aware of all the research on health benefits, they are very aware of how

much their pet means to them and can become very worried if they think pet ownership may come into conflict with human health matters. Happily this is rarely the case, but there are particular times when owners may seek professional advice.

Here are some of the more frequent questions that arise.

Are cats a risk for toxoplasmosis in pregnancy?

This is a question most cat owning women will ask when they become pregnant or plan a pregnancy. The answer is that a healthy, adult cat is unlikely to pose any risk, and that with some simple precautions there is no reason why an owner cannot continue to enjoy her cat throughout her pregnancy.

Although cats are a vital link in the transmission of toxoplasmosis, contact with the family cat is unlikely to be a risk. In a major study published in the British Medical Journal, the greatest risk for toxoplasmosis was found to be from eating undercooked meat. This accounted for 30–63 per cent of sources of toxoplasmosis infections in pregnancy. A further source of infection was through hand-to-mouth contact with contaminated soil whilst gardening, or through eating inadequately washed fruit or vegetables. Contact with cats was NOT a risk factor (9).

Although pregnancy is not a good time to acquire a kitten or very young cat since this is the time when they are most likely to acquire toxoplasmosis infection themselves, it is not necessary to give up a cat because of pregnancy, and there are a variety of sources of information available to owners who want advice on cat care during this time (10,11).

Is it safe to keep pets if you have children?

With simple hygiene and health precautions for both pet and child, pet ownership is not only safe, it can be beneficial for child development.

Children regard pets as significant friendships and important providers of social support (8), and involvement in pet care can help growth of empathy and consideration for other living beings.

There may be physical benefits, too. A current study investigating the health of children growing up in pet-owning households has shown that they may have more efficient immune functioning, and that they have lower absentee rates from school (7). There is also evidence that children born into cat owning households are less likely to have asthma later on in life (6). The proposed mechanism underlying these findings is that early exposure to cat/dog allergens can reduce subsequent risks of allergic sensitisation to multiple allergens during childhood, including non-pet allergens.

For children to derive these benefits it is, of course, necessary for some hygiene precautions to be put in place. Veterinary advice on control of internal and external parasites that might affect the pet is essential, as is good standards of hygiene in the home. However, in combination, these can ensure that children and pets make a safe and happy combination (12).

Do I have to give up my cat because I or a family member has asthma or an allergy?

It is very common for pets, especially cats, to be given up for rehoming because of asthma or an allergy in the family. This can be very distressing for everyone, especially if only one member of the family is affected. It is also common for medical advice to give up a pet to be ignored! Because of this it is often worth trying to see if the problem can be made manageable first.

The American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, and researchers at the University of Virginia, recommend taking measures to minimise exposure to indoor allergens to bring total exposure to within tolerance thresholds. In some cases symptoms can be reduced by 95 per cent which may enable the family to keep the pet. These measures are described in the Cats Protection publication on managing cats and asthma (11).

Should I keep my pet if I have a serious illness or if I am going through a traumatic time such as a bereavement?

There are strong arguments why people should be encouraged to keep their pets when coping with a serious illness of their own or having to come to terms with a major life event like a bereavement. At such times the relationship with a pet may provide a sense of normality when all else in life is disrupted and feels hopeless.

Coping with serious illness

A study which examined the role of pet ownership as a support to women recovering from breast cancer found that pets were special sources of tactile comfort. This simple 'cuddle factor' was difficult for many women to ask for from human relationships whilst coming to terms with mastectomy. Pets, and especially cats, were also used as emotional refuges where crying was much needed but was refrained from in front of the family because they, too, were affected by the fear of the woman's cancer.

Women using their pets in this way had a better sense of adjustment, greater optimism for the future and a greater sense of control over their illness, all of which were contributory factors to better recovery and

adjustment (12). Similar findings have been reported in living with other illnesses such as HIV and AIDS.

Where the illness or treatment results in reduced immune functioning it is not normally necessary to give up a pet, but it is most important that strict hygiene routines are observed. The Toxoplasmosis Trust has produced a variety of publications advising on precautions to be taken so that pets can be retained at this important time (10).

Bereavement and major life events

As with coping with an illness, it is helpful at times of major life disruption to try and maintain as much as possible that will give a sense of normality, continuity and purpose. Pet ownership can be very important at such times.

A study looking at sources of support used by people adjusting to spousal bereavement found that pets were highly significant providers of support in early-stage bereavement. Particular benefits reported by the participants in the study were that they could express their feelings openly to their pets; that having a pet eliminated much of the 'empty house syndrome' which so many found exceptionally painful to cope with; and that caring for the pet imposed a necessary routine on the day.

The study found that adjustment in early stage bereavement was better for pet owners than non-owners, and was characterised by fewer problems such as symptoms of minor illnesses, sleeplessness and need for medication (13).

Times of serious illness or major life disruption are not good times to get a new pet, but an existing one can be extremely valuable and supportive.

Pet loss

For most owners the death of a loved pet is a very painful event. It has even been likened to a human bereavement since many of the effects and symptoms of loss are similar. This is especially true where a pet has been a sole or main companion, or has been particularly central to a person's life.

However whereas most people expect strong reactions to the loss of a human, many pet owners are alarmed and upset at the strength of their feeling to the loss of their pet. Symptoms that are very commonly reported are sleeplessness, loss of appetite, loss of concentration, mood swings, depression and feelings of general illness. Owners with existing health problems frequently report exacerbation of their illnesses. Onset of episodes of mental illness has been reported, although this is rare.

The overall feeling of distress and lack of well-being can prompt people to consult health professionals for reassurance and advice. In most cases, sympathy and reassurance that their reactions are not abnormal, and advice on finding specialist helplines dealing with pet loss are all that is needed (14). However, for people who are also coping with concurrent problems such as a human bereavement, divorce, serious illness or other major problem, pet loss may be even more difficult to come to terms with as it often feels like an 'only friend' has been lost. People in this situation can need professional help and Pet Loss Helplines or similar services provided through vets' surgeries will normally advise a caller to consult their GP.

Older people and pet loss

Older pet owners should perhaps receive particular consideration since they are all too often at most risk of the effects of pet loss.

Many older people rely on pets as companions and central features in their lives. Often the pet was jointly owned with a deceased husband or wife, making it a special link with valuable memories. The effects of pet death can be very severe since they represent a final severing with links with the deceased. This has been referred to in clinical literature as 'double bereavement' because it can reawaken feelings of the human bereavement. Health problems and depression are also commonly reported, and sympathetic medical attention may be required.

However, it is not only the death of a pet which can be a problem for older pet owners. Their own failing health may mean a need to move to sheltered housing or residential care. This can bring about a very distressing paradox because there is an assumption that this has to result in parting with a pet. For the owner, losing their pet may be their greatest worry. For those making the arrangements for the move, it may not even be considered at all. This has resulted in some older owners simply refusing necessary care because they will not part from their pet.

In such cases, health professionals can be of enormous help in identifying the older person's concerns and lending support to the wish to keep a pet. Some Housing Associations do permit pets, especially cats or caged pets, and health professionals can help advise and direct on finding such Associations. Alternatively, there are organisations which will take the pet and care for it for the rest of its life (15). This knowledge can at least console owners if there is no possibility of keeping their pets.

In conclusion, pets can be highly important in people's everyday lives, adding to health and happiness. With professional understanding, help and advice pets can continue to be important at special times of need.

Cats Protection is happy to offer help and advice on any of the issues raised in this publication. For additional information on pet-friendly Housing Associations in the UK, phone our national Helpline on 08702 099 099.

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About the author

June McNicholas BSc PhD is a Senior Research Fellow and Lecturer in Health Psychology at the University of Warwick. She is regarded as one of Europe's leading researchers in the field of the health benefits and risks of pet ownership.



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17 Kings Road Horsham West Sussex RH13 5PN Charity No. 203644