

One More Health Benefit— a Dog

You have a good doctor; your family members help you eat healthy; your friends are on-board to exercise with you. But one member may be missing from your healthcare team: a furry, four-legged one. How about a dog?

According to Dan Buettner, longevity expert and founder of the Blue Zones, people who own a dog tend to walk an average of 5 hours a week without a lot of added effort.

And a dog can add other health benefits too, says Deb Logan, Executive Director of the Blue Zones Project of Southwest Florida. Dogs give people a sense of purpose, offer unconditional love and validation, help with social connections (when meeting people on walks), and even help people find their “right tribe” by meeting neighbors who are also dog lovers.

And even more comes from your connection to a dog: “When you feel securely attached to this living being, there are biological brain effects that reduce stress response, so it may affect your breathing rate or blood pressure or oxygen consumption or anxiety level,” says Dr. Greg Fricchione, Director of the Harvard-affiliated Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine.

The news is great for Fido lovers. But what if you're interested in other types of pets? Would a cat or a rabbit be just as beneficial? Other than the walking, other pets could contribute the same health benefits, Logan says. So go with



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whatever type of pet you would enjoy the most.

“The CDC recently released some

evidence that was pretty powerful,” Logan says. “They showed that when you pet an animal, you release oxytocin, the same hormone that gets released when mothers breastfeed. Petting an animal also helps lower blood pressure, cholesterol and triglycerides; decreases levels of loneliness; increases how much exercise people get and how much time they spend outside; and also increases the amount of time they spend socializing,” she says.

So, what to do if you don't have a pet and are not in a position to get one? You can still receive the health benefits by checking out Lee County Domestic Animal Services, Humane Society Naples or a shelter near you. Ask to volunteer to walk, or simply visit with, the dogs. Having contact with the dogs will do the trick.

If you do have a dog, see whether you can spread some good health and joy by bringing your pet to visit a local nursing home or hospital. “Most dogs love the socialization,” Logan says, “and it will benefit the people you are visiting.” But first, please check with the organization before bringing your pet, because every organization has different criteria about how your pet may serve in a therapy role. **NH**