



FURRY FRIENDS

Animal matters

Thinking about a pet?
It's good for your
physical and mental
health, writes
EMMA CHITTY

Picture: Getty Images/Blend Images



Pets are positive

Lisa Wood says it seems pets bring on feel-good hormones in their owners.
"Another area of emerging research relates to higher levels of oxytocin observed when people interact with their pets, which may explain the way that pets can help to counter stress and anxiety," Dr Wood says.
"Even people who don't own a pet themselves

There's a reason pets are known as man's best friend — having animals in the house has been proved to significantly improve physical and mental wellbeing.

Here, the experts weigh in on just how much difference a furry friend can make to our lives.

Clare Ballingall spokeswoman for The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners says there is a growing body of research pointing to pets improving human health.

"Studies have shown that pet owners are less likely to develop anxiety and depression —

loneliness is a huge risk factor for poor

mental health and our pets provide companionship and a sense of purpose," Dr Ballingall says.

"A study called The Effects of Animals on Human Health and Wellbeing is an often-quoted paper that reviews the evidence that companion animals can improve health and quality of life — they concluded that the evidence is largely supportive of the view that pets are good for us."

Lisa Wood, associate professor for the school of population health at the University of Western Australia says local studies have contributed to these findings.

"UWA has led some key studies internationally about the physical activity benefits of pets for both adults and children," Dr Wood says.

"My colleague Dr Hayley Christian's research has shown that dog owners are more likely to reach recommended levels of physical activity and, in a recent study we undertook in Perth

and three cities in the United States, dogs also helped

people to feel safer when out walking."

Movement motivators

"I think it's safe to say there are lots of physical and psychological benefits of owning a pet — I definitely wouldn't walk every day if I didn't have a dog," says Maree Daniels, executive manager for community engagement at RSPCA WA.

"The joy of having a pet isn't new to most Australians — we have one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world."

Dr Ballingall adds that pets such as dogs became instant workout buddies.

"Dogs are great exercise partners and often force us off the couch to get active," she says. "As well as this, some studies show that pets can help



reduce blood pressure and stress. Others have shown a positive impact of pets in chronic pain.”

Kate Lindsey, animal behaviourist at Kalmpets, says pets can help combat loneliness and stress.

“Pet owners are shown to cope significantly better with life stressors, including

marriage break-ups, loss, or other traumas,” Dr Lindsey says.

“They can also help people with social awkwardness connect with the community and provide support for children with learning difficulties, as well as easing social problems at school.”

Enhancing this sense of belonging is one of the biggest mental benefits of having a pet.

“Pets can help us belong — dog groups down at the park are a great way to make new friends and meet like-minded individuals,” says Luke Brewer, spokesman at Vetwest Animal Hospitals.

“You can also participate in numerous pet-friendly events held around Perth every year, a great chance to socialise your dog and get them — and you — out and about.”

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“Even people who don’t own a pet themselves can benefit from interactions with companion animals, as seen in the powerful role of therapy dogs who visit people in hospital or elderly people in nursing homes.”

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Clare Ballingall



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