Do Pets Actually Help You Live Longer?

7 MIN READ

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The health benefits of pet ownership are a two-way street. Science shows which route to take.

Not long ago, my family of four invited a hound-retriever rescue, Lula, to become our long-awaited fifth. The decision was based largely on my kids' incessant pleas, but I also reasoned it was wrong to walk as much as I do — often upwards of 12,000 steps a day — without a pet to reap the benefits beside me.

Fast forward three months and I now have a more *complete* picture of how Lula, still a puppy, fits into my health habits. My steps are down, since she prefers her exercise in bite-sized bursts over long, leisurely walks. I sleep less with her draped over my feet. Nicknamed "Shoe-la," she's gutted every last pair of tennis shoes in the house. Surprising no one but me, getting a pet has resulted in *exactly zero tennis*.

Yet for all the ways my dog is shaping my current health routines, I've also wondered how I'm shaping hers. A symbiotic tether, I doubt any of it stays neatly on just one side of the leash.

What the research actually says about pets and longevity is more surprising, more honest, and more useful than the headlines suggest. Dog owners, for one, tend to walk more, stress less, and by some accounts may even live longer. But when you drill down into the data, it seems we've both over- and under-estimated the ways our healthspans and our pets' are intertwined. While some claims are overhyped, we've also managed to overlook the entire other side of the coin.

We *now* know that the longevity science runs both ways. You affect your pet's healthspan just as much as they affect yours. Here's what the data supports, where it falls short, and what you and your pet can actually do about it.

What Your Pet Does For Your Health

Claims about the health benefits of pets have traveled from academic journals to morning shows so smoothly that they're now widely regarded as common sense. Some of those claims are true, while others are less substantiated.

The biggest health benefits of pet ownership appear to be happening in your brain. One of the more compelling pieces of research comes from a fairly recent, large longitudinal **study** tracking adults aged 50 and over across eight European countries for nearly two decades. Rather than treating pet ownership as a single variable, researchers separated it by species including dogs, cats, birds, and fish. They then measured effects on two distinct cognitive domains: executive functioning and episodic memory.

The study found that pet ownership overall was associated with slower cognitive decline across both of those domains, but that protection didn't extend equally to every animal. Dog and cat owners showed measurably slower decline compared to non-owners, but bird and fish owners did not, suggesting the benefit may depend on the type of interaction, not just the presence of a pet. The study's design — 18 years of data, multiple waves, a multilevel modelling approach — gives the findings unusual weight.

The promise of better heart health and a longer life are perhaps more complicated questions. While past headlines have cited **research** from the American Heart Association claiming dog owners have a 31% reduction in cardiovascular death and a 24% reduction in all-cause mortality, those researchers later corrected their findings in a **separate re-appraisal** of their own evidence.

While the team still found a protective association between dog ownership and those with preexisting cardiovascular disease, the impact virtually vanished in the general population.

Their adjusted meta-analysis showed “a statistically nonsignificant 7% risk reduction in the association between dog ownership and all-cause mortality” after controlling for exercise, BMI, and other confounders.

Ultimately, this undercuts important evidence that having a dog helps you live longer. Does it help you live *better*? I, and plenty of **researchers**, would still say yes. That distinction matters. Living longer and living better aren’t the same question, and for pet owners, the second one may be the more important answer.

What You Do For Your Pet’s Health

Just as our pets sway certain aspects of our healthspans, we also impact how our dogs age. Not dissimilar to us, their diet, exercise, and body weight are all key predictors of pet longevity.

According to a **2022 survey** by the Association for Pet Obesity Prevention, 60% of cats and 59% of dogs in the U.S. are overweight or obese. This can have profound effects on our animals as they age.

In fact, **one study** looked at how weight affects longevity in more than 50,000 middle aged, neutered dogs. The researchers found that risk of death was greater among overweight dogs, across all 12 breeds they studied. However, the weight penalty wasn’t the same for every breed. Smaller dogs, which tend to live longer than their larger counterparts, appeared to be most affected. Yorkshire Terriers were hit hardest: overweight Yorkies lived roughly 2.5 years less than healthy-weight ones (16.2 vs. 13.7 years). Meanwhile, overweight German Shepherds lived only about 4 months less than healthy-weight ones (12.5 vs. 12.1 years).

That pattern mirrors the human data. A **2018 study** of 3.6 million adults in the UK found that obesity shortened life expectancy by 3.5 to 4.2 years, with the effect stronger in younger adults. In both species, excess weight costs years of life, and the

penalty isn’t uniform: it depends on age, sex, and body type.

Weight, diet, and exercise aren’t the only factors that shape how our pets age. Just as we need social engagement and cognitive enrichment to live our best, healthiest, and longest lives, so do our animals. **Studies on rats** show that this type of stimulation is associated with greater brain volume, stronger neural connections, and enhanced memory. You’ll see these same effects in humans who stay engaged mentally and socially into their later years.

Understanding How Dogs Age Helps Us Understand Ourselves

Researchers at the **Dog Aging Project** are working to understand not only how dogs age, but also how that knowledge translates into lessons on human aging. They’re tracking more than 50,000 dogs to generate the largest canine healthspan dataset ever assembled.

One of the group’s most compelling **studies** was published just this month in *The Journals of Gerontology.* The researchers analyzed blood samples from nearly 1,000 pet dogs to understand which metabolites — small molecules in the blood that reflect how the body is functioning — were associated with early death.

They found that the metabolites that predict early death in dogs are strikingly similar to the ones that predict early death in humans. This wasn’t a small or uncertain signal, but a strong and statistically robust connection.

Dogs and humans already have a lot in common — similar genetics in some respects, shared environments and diseases, and access to healthcare and medical treatments. But the key practical advantage of studying dogs is that they age much faster than we

do. If the molecular signature of aging and mortality is shared across species, then discoveries made in dogs could translate directly and quickly into human medicine. Through our canine companions, we can study the full arc of aging and disease in years rather than decades.

How You And Your Pet Can Age Better Together

Your health and your pet's health are linked, so it pays to think of yourselves as partners in aging. You'll both benefit from sharing a handful of simple habits.

Walk Every Day: For dogs and dog owners, daily walks are a simple place to start, with major returns on health. Aiming high at 10,000 steps will not only increase physical fitness and promote mutual weight management, but can also provide a sense of routine — linked to **better memory** as you both age. Try getting out into nature for added mental stimulation, crucial to cognitive health.

Keep Learning Together: Cognitive decline in aging dogs follows patterns strikingly similar to dementia in humans, and the same thing helps both: staying mentally engaged. Another Dog Aging Project **study** of more than 15,000 companion dogs found that inactive dogs had more than six times the odds of cognitive dysfunction compared to very active dogs of the same age and health status. Puzzle feeders, new walking routes, training games, and novel social interactions all count as enrichment. If it's stimulating for your dog, it's probably stimulating for you, too.

Focus on Nutrition: A spotlight on diet can further impact healthspan in both people and pets. However, **recent findings** from the Dog Aging Project might dissuade you from preparing homemade meals for your dog. Of the 1,726 home-prepared meals the team reviewed for that paper, only 6% were considered nutritionally complete. (Noting here that the study was NIH-funded and the authors reported no financial

conflicts, though it's worth mentioning the finding has already been adopted by commercial pet food brands in their marketing.)

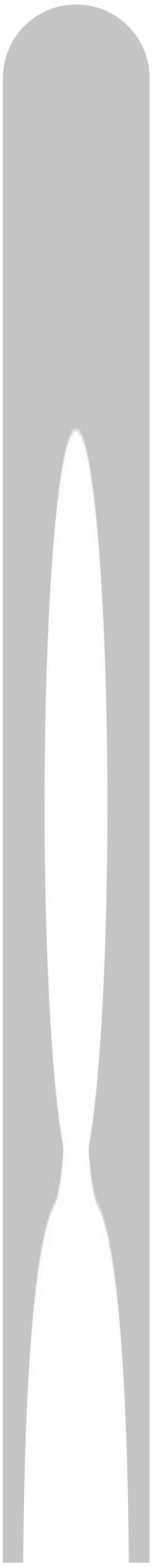
Watch for Portion Drift: Instead, feed your pet high quality, balanced meals — and be conscious of portion control. This small **study** conducted on labrador retrievers confirms that reducing food intake by 25% resulted in a longer median lifespan. "Compared with control dogs, food-restricted dogs weighed less and had lower body fat content and lower serum triglycerides, triiodothyronine, insulin, and glucose concentrations," the study authors add.

Protect Dental Health: Periodontal disease can affect up to **80% of dogs** by age three, and it doesn't stay in the mouth. Bacteria from infected gums can enter the bloodstream and damage the heart, kidneys, and liver. The parallel holds in humans: periodontal disease in people is connected to cardiovascular disease and systemic inflammation through the **same pathways**. Regular veterinary dental cleanings and daily brushing matter for your dog's longevity. (Your dentist would agree).

And, don't forget to embrace the joy of pet companionship, which can do just as much for your own health and wellbeing as anything else. Yes, they're our partners in health and longevity, but more importantly, they're some of our best friends.

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