

# Pets Are the Best Medicine

by JEN REEDER

LEARN WHAT THE HEALING POWER  
OF PETS CAN DO FOR THE PEOPLE  
WHO LOVE THEM.









**A**nimal-lovers cherish the simple pleasure of a dog wagging his tail when we walk in the door or a cat purring with pleasure during a cuddle. Science can help us understand the benefits these experiences bring. A growing body of research shows pets are good for our physical, mental, and emotional health.

Steven Feldman, executive director of the Human Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI) in Washington, D.C., says the nonprofit was created in 2010 to document the positive impacts pets have

on our lives. A free online database called HABRI Central already makes approximately 30,000 studies available to the public.

"Pets have measurable benefits at every stage of life," he says. "[Studies show] both prenatal and early-childhood exposure to pets prevents allergies and asthma later in life. We know that pets help kids with their learning and development, encouraging empathy and altruistic behavior."

Feldman says people with pets are more likely to get their recommended exercise. Pet owners who walk their dogs five or more times a week are statistically less likely to be obese. Pets lower our blood pressure and stress levels, and people with pets are less likely to be depressed. Research also shows pets are important for healthy aging, providing social companionship, and connecting owners with other people to

prevent loneliness.

Dogs and cats also help people with disabilities. For example, they decrease the stress hormone cortisol in children with autism and veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Heather Loenser, DVM, senior

veterinary officer for the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), says veterinarians witness the healing power of the human-animal bond every day.

"For decades, though, there wasn't data to support what animal-lovers and veterinarians knew to be true," she says. "As a mom who works with animals, I was pleased to learn that studies show that teenagers who lived with a cat during their first year of life had a 48 percent lower risk

of cat allergies than their peers. Also, another study showed prenatal exposure to dogs ... decreases a child's chance of developing allergic diseases."

Paula Monroe-Aldridge, DVM, president of the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP), notes there is speculation that a cat's purr has some healing properties, such as increasing joint mobility and bone strength. She is

particularly intrigued by a University of Minnesota study that found a decreased risk of death from heart attack or stroke for people with cats.

"The study suggested 'acquisition of cats as pets may be a novel strategy for reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease in high-risk individuals,'" she says.

Ed Creagan, MD, FAAHPM, professor of medical oncology at the Mayo Clinic College of Medicine, has analyzed the world's literature on the healing power of pets for articles in medical journals. He recently wrote the book *Farewell* about his 40,000 bedside visits with terminally ill patients. Based on his research and experiences, Creagan is convinced pets offer meaning to our lives as well as health benefits.

"When you hug a cat, when you stroke a horse, when you groom a dog, there is a cascade of chemicals that are restorative, that are regenerative, that are immunologically enhancing to decrease inflammatory changes—and increase the length of life and your quality of life," he says. "This is not science fiction."

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# A Tiny Service Dog Helps a Child Manage Her Diabetes

Lydia Green of Bloomington, Illinois, says she and her husband were terrified when their 12-month-old daughter, Ellie, had to be airlifted to a hospital for emergency care. Doctors saved her life and diagnosed her with type 1 diabetes. If Ellie's blood sugar drops too low, she's in immediate danger of having a

seizure or passing out. If it spikes too high, she's at risk for long-term problems such as organ failure.

In January of 2015, when Ellie was in second grade, the little girl partnered with a diabetic alert dog named Iris. The Papillon trained at Ohio-based nonprofit 4 Paws for Ability, which specializes in service dogs for children.

"Iris can smell when Ellie's blood sugar is changing, so she will bark if she smells anything out of the ordinary range," Lydia says. "Ellie's continuous glucose monitor is 20 minutes delayed and Iris is faster. She jumps out of Ellie's bed and runs down the hall to wake us up. It's given us all more security at night."

Ellie used to climb into her parents' bed almost every night because she was scared. But as soon as Iris started sleeping in her bed, the girl began sleeping through the night. Now Ellie is an active sixth grader who loves cross country, volleyball, and socializing with friends. She introduces Iris to her teachers at the start of each school year and likes talking about her dog and diabetes.

Iris recently saved Ellie from a potentially life-threatening situation. Ellie was asleep after a cross country race. Suddenly, Iris began barking and woke

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**IRIS CAN SMELL WHEN ELLIE'S BLOOD SUGAR CHANGES.**

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everyone up. Sure enough, Ellie's blood sugar was plummeting.

"Iris never turns off like the technology turns off," Lydia says. "Getting her was definitely a life-changing experience."







## A Rescued Cat Eases a Woman's Cancer Battle

Molly Sinkewicz of Harvard, Massachusetts, was

just 23 years old when a friend at a dinner party told her, "Something doesn't look right in your neck. I think you need to get that looked at." Molly was shocked when a doctor diagnosed her with thyroid cancer.

"I was mentally unprepared for that," she recalls. "It was very, very scary."

In the summer of 2016, Molly endured two surgeries to remove her thyroid and 19 lymph nodes. Then she underwent grueling radiation treatments and endured extreme nausea and headaches. She didn't have energy for her sewing, reading, or even watching TV—let alone entertaining.

But her rescued cats, Meadow and Roo, kept the young woman company. Meadow stayed cuddled into her side, and at the peak of her illness, normally aloof Roo would climb under the covers with her.

"They were good for both my mental and my physical health during my recovery process," Molly says.

In fact, the cats are so attuned to her that they can sense if one of her headaches is about to turn into a migraine. They will cling to her and cuddle her—hard. Meadow once sat on her head to get her attention, and Roo will perch on her chest. Then Molly

knows to take her medication or a nap to try to minimize the coming pain.

**MEADOW CAN SENSE IF A HEADACHE WILL TURN INTO A MIGRAINE.**

Molly recently had Meadow certified as a therapy cat with Pet Partners, a Washington-based nonprofit with more than 10,000 pet owners who

volunteer with therapy-animal programs. She plans to take Meadow to visit hospice patients after she and her new husband return from their honeymoon.

"Meadow is just the calmest cat,"

Molly says about her companion. "She is so gentle and loving."



# A Chocolate Lab Helps This Army Veteran Go On Living

JP Painter credits his service dog, Harley, not only with helping keep him healthy but also with saving his life. Painter served in the U.S. Army as a Captain and deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. When he returned to civilian life in Georgia after seven years of active duty, he suffered from severe PTSD and chronic pain. He couldn't tolerate being around people and was almost fired several times for not showing up to work. His relationship with his three children grew strained.

"My PTSD and depression had gotten so bad that on more than one occasion

I considered ending up being one of the 22 veterans that die every day of suicide," he says.

**HARLEY KNOWS EXACTLY WHERE HE NEEDS TO BE AND WHAT HE NEEDS TO DO.**

Fortunately, JP ran into a fellow veteran who connected him with Puppies Behind Bars, a New York-based nonprofit that trains inmates to raise service dogs for wounded war veterans.

In 2015, JP partnered with a handsome chocolate Lab named Harley—and everything changed.

Harley, who knows more than 100 cues, can open and close doors, retrieve objects, and brace for a "lift assist" when JP's pain is too intense to stand up without help. The dog wakes JP from nightmares and night terrors, sometimes risking physical injury to himself. In public, Harley knows the cue "Got my back" and intuitively taps JP's leg with his nose when a stranger approaches, calms him if he begins to panic, and leads him to the car.

"He knows exactly where he needs to be and what he needs to do," JP says. "It gives me the confidence to be able to go into a store and not be sweating and full of anxiety, because he's literally watching out for me."

Thanks to Harley, JP has been promoted at work. He's working to repair relationships with loved ones and hasn't considered suicide since teaming up with Harley.

"We're talking about a dog that literally brought me back to my family, and brought me back to my friends, and brought me closer to whom I used to be," he says. "I could go on and on about how amazing this dog is."



photos KRITSADA PANICHGUL (LEFT), IAN MCFARLANE (RIGHT)