

Ask A Vet: The Flip Side of Helping Animals

Sunday, April 5 2015

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My husband says he enjoys caring for his cattle and his dog rides everywhere with him - pickup, tractor, porch swing, etc.- you get the idea. He's healthy and happy and takes good care of them, is there anything to my thought that they are somewhat responsible for his well being?

-Goshen Granny

Dear Reader,

Granny, your hunch is right on! This Ask a Vet column usually deals with how we can help our animals stay healthy and happy. Decades of research has shown they return the favor. Being responsible for feeding, shelter, and health of animals give us a reason to be alive to get up in the morning and take care of them. They improve our quality of life and the unconditional love and companionship your animals and pets give to you adds to your overall physical health and mental stability.

The National Institute of Health has collected decades of research data that illustrates the many health benefits of animal ownership. Stress is decreased when you are in the presence of your pet even more than when with your spouse (sorry), family, or close friend. Think about it - no matter what terrible thing happens to you - your good old dog still loves you unconditionally! This reduction of stress lowers blood pressure in hypertensive people according to The Center of Disease Control studies. In my own experience I can lower my count as much as 20 points by simply thinking of petting my dogs. Pet owners often lead a more active lifestyle by walking with them, playing with them, feeding and cleaning up after them (even your cows). This is the reason animal owners often have lower cholesterol and triglyceride levels than folks who don't own pets. Getting more activity and less stress eases pain from headaches and arthritis. Mood is improved because pet owners socialize more than non-pet owners. Just ask a person walking a cute dog if helps their social life! How many thousands of nursing homes use animal visitation to stimulate the mood of their patients? Cats get in the act too, having a cat has shown in one study to decrease heart attacks and strokes by 30 - 40%. Having a dog helps surviving heart attack victims to be significantly more likely to be alive a year later. My daughter-in law is an intensive care nurse and has noted how the people she cares for light up when they talk about their pets. They often tell her they look forward to getting home to care for their animals.

One of the most interesting and important health benefits of pet ownership is how animals help children. A little girl hugging her pony or a little boy having an heart to heart talk with his dog - these children are helped emotionally. Solid scientific evidence also shows they have healthier immune systems, lower incidence of allergies, and fewer chronic respiratory ailments. "Science has officially weighed in on the human-animal bond and the evidence is clear!" according to a gathering of medical experts. Continuing research will validate this bond as an important part of therapy for human health problems. Thanks Critters!

-Dr. Jerry Sellon