

How and when to pick a pet

BY DAWN ARMSTRONG
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Pets offer unconditional love and documented health benefits. The Swedish Medical Center of Seattle, Wash., lists a range of benefits with specific study examples showing that those who own pets may have significantly lower systolic blood pressure, triglyceride values and cholesterol levels than those who do not own pets – even after accounting for additional exercise and other differences that might be present. Researchers also found that cardiovascular risk factors were greater among those who did not own pets than those who did.

Published in the September/October 2002 issue of the journal "Psychosomatic Medicine," lead study author Dr. Karen Allen, State University of New York at Buffalo, states, "While the idea of a pet as social support may appear to some as a peculiar notion, our participants' responses to stress, combined with their descriptions of the meaning of pets in their lives, suggest to us that social support can indeed cross species".

When a family decides to bring a pet into the household, while beneficial, there are criteria for making sure that the chosen pet is the right one at the right time. Following are a few important considerations.

First, does everyone in the family agree to participate in pet care? The pet is dependent upon his or her human guardian for food, water, shelter, medical care, mental stimulation and training. Even if the pet "belongs" to one member, there will be times when support is needed from others.

Second, is it a good time for a pet to join the family? What is the current family lifestyle including obligations to school, sports, work, travel? Is there quality time available for a pet?

Third, what is the current environment for a pet? Is there access to a yard for a dog, a pasture for a horse, a cage for a pocket pet? If renting, does the landlord allow pets? Are there small children in the house? Children under the age of 6 do not know that they can hurt a pet. Stuffed toys are safer.

Fourth, if there are pets already in the home, will they adjust when your attention is divided? Some welcome company while others become depressed or aggressive when another joins the family.

Fifth, is there an ongoing pet budget? According to Stephen Zawistowski, senior vice president of animal sciences for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the first year cost of a pet varies from \$1,314 for a small dog to \$235 for a fish. Dog and cat expenses include veterinary care, boarding, grooming, food and treats, toys, training, collars and leashes. Veterinary care is more than half of those expenses, which is why many pet owners carry pet medical insurance. Equipment for special need or exotic pets can escalate costs. Large bird cages run up to \$1,000. Reptiles require humidifiers and heating equipment.

Sixth, is there commitment to lifetime care? Pet life spans vary widely but have become longer. Family commitment must be ongoing as pets grow from "infants" to adolescents to adults to more needy and beloved seniors. Large or small, furry or feathered, pets are sentient beings, totally trusting and dependent upon their human guardians.

For questions about information presented here and resources for your next pet, call (530) 542-2857.

Provided by the Lake Tahoe Humane Society and S.P.C.A. to help "Keep Tahoe Kind."

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