

“My family is thinking about getting a pet. What are the pros and cons?”

Pets can provide love, compassion and loyalty.
But remember they come with responsibilities.



Benefits of owning an animal

People who have pets can enjoy several physical and emotional health benefits including:

- **Lower stress levels:** Taking care of and playing with your pet can make you feel good and lower your cortisol levels, a marker for stress.
- **Decrease in blood pressure, cholesterol and triglycerides:** Studies have shown that this may be due to animal owners having lower stress levels and more opportunity for physical activity.
- **Improvement in your mood:** Pets can help with symptoms of depression because they can offer love and decrease feelings of loneliness.
- **Increased opportunity to socialize:** While walking your dog, people may be more likely to stop and chat with you, or you might meet a new friend at the dog park. There are also forums online where you can chat with other pet owners about training tips, what to expect as pets age and the best ways to care for them.

Some of these benefits depend on the type of animal you own, but most pets can provide benefits to your emotional health.

Responsibilities of an animal owner

When you own an animal, you are their parent. And although it can be rewarding, keep in mind the responsibilities that come with animal ownership:

- **Being a caretaker:** You're not only responsible for feeding your pet, but if your pet is injured, sick or needs a check-up, you're in charge of the veterinarian bills. Some pets, even when healthy, require monthly preventative medications.
- **Planning ahead:** If you have a vacation or weekend away, you will have to make sure your pet is taken care of. This might include boarding them or having a friend or family member stop by to help.
- **Training:** Most pets will require training. Not only house training, but behavioral training may also be needed. This takes diligence, time and dedication.
- **Exercise:** Some breeds of dogs require regular exercise. If you have a big enough yard, it might be as simple as letting them outside to play. But if you don't have that luxury, you'll need to take them for a walk, run or hike. The good news is you're getting exercise, too!

The advantages of animals go beyond just being pets. Animals are used as guides for people with disabilities, as well as a form of therapy for people who suffer from various conditions.

Service dogs

A service dog is a dog that has been specifically trained to help a person with mental and/or physical disabilities. These dogs are covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which allows them into most places that are open to the public.

- Seeing eye dogs for the visually impaired
- Signal dogs for the hearing impaired
- Sensory signal dogs for people with autism
- Psychiatric service dogs for people with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) or other issues

Emotional support animals

Although not covered under the ADA, emotional support animals may be used as part of a medical treatment plan for people with depression, certain phobias or anxiety. The biggest differences between service dogs and emotional support animals are that emotional support animals are not specially trained, and they are not limited to just dogs. Cats, birds, and many other animals can all be registered as emotional support animals.

Animal-assisted therapy

Performed in a controlled or clinical setting, and usually limited to dogs, animal-assisted therapy can help people cope with health problems like cancer, heart disease or mental health issues. The animal provides comfort and enjoyment, which can help clients or residents be more optimistic about their situation. Animal-assisted therapy is typically used in hospitals and nursing homes, but has also been used in prisons to help inmates cope with stress.

If someone in your family is allergic to dogs or cats, look into breeds that shed less and release less dander into the air. For more information about the pets and allergies, visit fallonhealth.org, click Healthwise® Knowledgebase under Quick links, and search "pets".

If you or someone in your family has allergies or asthma and need more information, contact our Disease Management department at 1-800-333-2535, ext. 69898 (TRS 711) Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.