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I grew up in Montana surrounded by cats and dogs and even had a horse and mule for a while. My journey to veterinary school was not a direct path. When starting my undergraduate studies at Montana State University, I intended to become a human physician, but soon realized that I needed to dedicate my life to animals.

In undergraduate school, pets were not allowed. This was the first time in my life that I could not enjoy the friendly wag of a tail or the comfort of a feline's presence. I simply missed my pets too much; they had such a strong presence in my life that I decided to focus all of my efforts on getting into veterinary medical school. My passion for animals would not only allow me to help pets but help their families too. At Colorado State University's College of Veterinary Medicine, I started my own family of pets that included a golden retriever, great dane and a cat from the local animal shelter.

After graduating veterinary school in 2009, I headed east to North Carolina. I have shared my home with dogs, cats, a guinea pig and even a chinchilla. I get to help pets on a daily basis and I love my work place. I have been at Southwoods Animal Hospital for years and became a partner doctor in 2013.

Pets Prescribed for Healthier Living

Pets are prescribed to keep us healthy, so what should we do for them?

I am dedicating this article to Cairo, my great dane who passed earlier this year. She was big, clumsy, goofy, yet so gentle and had a sweet presence. She made me happy, she made me laugh, and ultimately she made me cry. Pets are members of the family, often our best friends, and are an integral part of our lives. "Pets are not our whole lives, but they make our lives whole".

The American Veterinary Medical Association defines the human-animal bond as follows: It is a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, animals, and the environment.

As time goes on, research and data continues to demonstrate how pets improve our lives and make us healthier. Not only does this bond improve us as individuals, newer research is showing how it improves communities as a whole.

The following list from Zoetis shows a few of the health benefits we receive from having a cat or dog in our lives.

- Lowered blood pressure
- Decreased anxiety and depression
- Decreased risk of heart disease
- Strengthened immune system
- Allergy prevention in children
- Increased social interaction
- Reduced stress levels
- Accelerated heart attack recovery

Not only are pets keeping us healthier, some doctors are actually prescribing animal contact for patients who already have an illness or are recovering from a condition. Here are the percentage of doctors who report a moderate to significant improvement when an animal is part of a patient's therapy (courtesy of Zoetis): 76% report improved patient relationships with staff members; 88% report improved physical condition; 97% report improved mental health condition; 98% report improved mood or outlook.

So pets are not only sweet, caring, loyal, cute and fun, they help us physically and emotionally. They rely on us to show them love, keep them safe, healthy and happy. This relationship, like other relationships, takes work. It is not easy caring for a pet and it is a great responsibility.

It is our role as veterinarians to help foster this relationship. If you do not have a vet, please start scheduling annual visits for your pets. Here is a bare bones list of essentials that I recommend for all cats and dogs to keep your furry loved ones as healthy as possible.

- Annual physical exams to identify health problems early so treatment can begin before it's too late.
- Routine blood panels to evaluate internal organs, immune function, screen for diabetes and check heartworm status.
- Annual intestinal parasite screening. Intestinal parasites can be life-threatening and some parasites can be zoonotic (spread to people).
- Appropriate vaccinations based on your pet's unique lifestyle. Vaccinations, or "shots", protect against a wide variety of disease.
- Continued, year round heartworm prevention. This deadly disease is spread by mosquitoes. There is no cure for cats, and treatment in dogs is costly, challenging and not free of possible complications.
- Continued, year round flea and tick control. Fleas and ticks can cause skin problems, spread disease (some of which affect people) and infest the home.

In addition to these items, please keep your pet from becoming overweight as it has been shown to decrease life expectancy. Talk to your veterinary healthcare team regarding appropriate diets and routine dental care. By three years of age, most pets have evidence of periodontal disease and this progressive condition ultimately impacts not only the mouth but the internal organs as well.

I strongly recommend being proactive in regard to your pet's care, please don't wait for problems and then be reactive. This is the importance of preventative medicine. After all, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

If you have a "Cairo" in your life, please honor this pet and give her the same level of love that she gives you. I challenge everyone who reads this article to the following: 1.) Educate at least three people regarding the health benefits pets give people. 2.) Do your best to cover all of the essentials listed above to keep your pet healthy.

For more information, visit: <https://thepeteffect.org>



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