

A pet in your life keeps the doctor away

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Lowers blood pressure, encourages exercise, improves psychological health— these may sound like the effects of a miracle drug, but they are actually among the benefits of owning a four-legged, furry pet. This fall, the University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction (ReCHAI) will explore the many ways animals benefit people of all ages during the International Society for Anthrozoology and Human-Animal Interaction Conference in Kansas City, Mo., on Oct. 20-25.

"Research in this field is providing new evidence on the positive impact pets have in our lives," said Rebecca Johnson, associate professor in the MU Sinclair School of Nursing, the College of Veterinary Medicine and director of ReCHAI. "This conference will provide a unique opportunity to connect international experts working in human-animal interaction research with those already working in the health and veterinary medicine fields. A wonderful array of presentations will show how beneficial animals can be in the lives of children, families and older adults."

Earlier this year, the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), one of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), co-hosted two workshops with The WALTHAM Centre for [Pet](#) Nutrition, a division of Mars Incorporated, bringing together leading experts to discuss the benefits of human-animal interaction in childhood. With support from a grant from NICHD and sponsorship from WALTHAM, the conference will continue this discussion.

Marty Becker, known as "America's Veterinarian" and a veterinary contributor to ABC's "Good Morning America" for more than 12 years, will give a special presentation at the conference called "The Power of Love: the science and the soul behind that affection-connection we call The Bond."

Other conference discussions will include ways that human-animal interaction benefits humans and animals, new facets of human-animal interaction, and ways to apply new human-animal interaction knowledge to their fields. Some of the presentations will highlight the special role of companion animals in facilitating reading and physical activity in children and adults.

"Pets are of great importance to people, especially during hard economic times," Johnson said. "Pets provide unconditional love and acceptance and may be part of answers to societal problems, such as inactivity and obesity."

ReCHAI sponsors several projects that attempt to further the understanding and value of the relationship between humans and animals. In 2008, ReCHAI sponsored the "Walk a Hound, Lose a Pound and Stay Fit for Seniors." In the preliminary program, a group of older adults were matched with shelter dogs, while another group of [older adults](#) were partnered with a human walk buddy. For 12 weeks, participants were encouraged to walk on an outdoor trail for one hour, five times a week. At the end of the program, researchers measured how much the older adults' activity levels improved.

"The older people who walked their dogs improved their walking capabilities by 28 percent," Johnson said. "They had more confidence walking on the trail, and they increased their speed. The older people who walked with humans only had a 4 percent increase in their walking capabilities. The human walking buddies tended to discourage each other

and used excuses such as the weather being too hot."

NICHD is interested in building upon existing research and spurring more studies involving children and adolescents.

"The few studies that have been conducted suggest that pet ownership may have multiple health and emotional benefits for both children and adults," said James Griffin, a scientist at NICHD. "But there has been relatively little rigorous research documenting these benefits and examining how and why they occur. By providing support for this conference and additional research studies, we hope to generate some answers."

The Human-Animal Interaction Conference will bring together people around the world working on similar projects as ReCHAI, Johnson said. These people include nurses, physicians, veterinarians, social workers, psychologists, physical and occupational therapists, and activity directors.

"Today, pets are in more than 60 percent of American homes," said Charlotte McKenney, assistant director of ReCHAI. "Research involving human-animal interaction can be extremely beneficial. More people are incorporating pets into their leisure time, such as making them part of their exercise routines, taking them to dog parks and bringing them to family events."

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