

Is there a link between your pets and your food choices?

April 13 2018



Assistant Professor of Psychology Julia Hormes, left, and graduate student Sydney Heiss, both with their dogs, conducted research on the influence that childhood pets have on a person's diet choices in adulthood. Credit: University at Albany

People who grow up with a greater variety of pets are significantly more likely to follow a vegetarian diet as adults, according to research by a professor-student team in the University at Albany psychology department.

Sydney Heiss, graduate student in the department of psychology, worked

with assistant professor Julia Hormes to gain a better understanding of the factors that play a role in a person's decision to refrain from animal products as adults.

The two recruited study participants from social media webpages focused on food in general, including those focused on vegetarianism and veganism, resulting in a pool of 325 participants with a mean age of 30 years.

Participants provided their demographic information and whether they followed any [vegetarian diet](#), including "flexitarian" (mostly vegetarian, but sometimes eats meat), "semi-vegetarian" (eats some types of meat but refrains from others), "pescetarian" (eats fish, eggs and dairy but refrains from other [meat products](#)), "lacto-ovo-vegetarian" (eats eggs and dairy, but refrains from all animal flesh), "vegan" (no animal products whatsoever), and "raw vegan" (consumes exclusively uncooked non-animal products).

Heiss and Hormes then assessed the individual's beliefs and attitudes regarding the use of animals in food, clothing and research and surveyed them on their ownership and relationship with any childhood pets. Participants were asked about the number and types of their childhood pets, how often they were responsible for their animal(s) care, how close they felt to the animal(s), etc.

After a statistical analyses of all responses, the duo found:

- Those who owned pets in childhood were significantly more likely than those without pets to follow a vegetarian or vegan diet as an adult.
- Those who owned a variety of pets (i.e. hamsters, dogs and cats, as opposed to just dogs) were more likely to avoid a wider range of animal products (e.g., refrain from all animal products as

opposed to only meat) than those who owned fewer pets.

- A wider variety of pets led to a stronger opposition towards animal exploitation, which in turn led to less animal product consumption.
- Closeness to ones' pet was a significant predictor of a person's likelihood to refrain from [animal products](#) as an adult.

"It seems as though individuals who had different types of pets more easily empathize with farmed animals or those used in research," said Heiss. "For example, someone who had only a dog may have difficulty feeling empathy for a cow, whereas someone who grew up with farm animals may be more attuned to characteristics that are shared across all species and therefore, better able to empathize with all [animals](#)."

Though research previously existed suggesting a potential link between pet ownership and animal product restriction, Hormes notes there's a key difference about this most recent study.

"Past research has suggested that closeness to a childhood pet is the key factor that predicts increased empathy and vegetarianism in adulthood," said Hormes. "Our findings suggest that there may be more than one pathway to vegetarianism in adulthood – the number of pets in childhood, ethical concerns towards animal use, and level of vegetarianism is significant."

More information: Sydney Heiss et al. Ethical concerns regarding animal use mediate the relationship between variety of pets owned in childhood and vegetarianism in adulthood, *Appetite* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2017.12.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2017.12.005)

Provided by University at Albany

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