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# It's All About You Diva

## Dog ownership good for health



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JUSTINE Levine opens the gate after a day at work and her dog Archie Adams bounds towards her.

It is exactly 5.15pm, the time that the Staffordshire bull terrier-cross has been waiting for all day.

"He knows that when we get home then it is off for a walk to the off-leash park up the road," Justine said.

Justine, 26, has always owned a pet and agrees with the many studies done on pet owners which link ownership with improved health.

"They are so loyal," she said.

"It makes you exercise as well. I know I always feel better after a walk with Archie.

"It helps clear your mind after a day at work."

About 40 per cent of Australian households own a dog. Simply walking the dog a few times a week could offer owners numerous health and social benefits.

A psychologist from Queen's University, Belfast, said dog owners tended to have lower blood pressure and cholesterol.

Writing in the British Journal of

Health Psychology, she said that regular "walkies" might partly explain the difference.

She confirmed that pet owners tended in general to be healthier than average members of the population.

"It is possible that dogs can directly promote our well-being by buffering us from stress, one of the major risk factors associated with ill-health.

"The ownership of a dog can also lead to increases in physical activity and facilitate the development of social contacts, which may enhance both physiological and psychological human health in a more indirect manner."

Dr June McNicholas, a health psychologist who has specialised in research into the health effects of pet ownership, said an important reason for the improved health of dog-owners was not just the exercise received while taking it for walks, but the opportunity for social contact with other dog-owners.

She said: "For older people, an

animal can fulfil the 'need to be needed', perhaps after children have left home.

"In some cases, the social support offered by an animal is greater than the support another human could offer."

A West Australian study found that people living in retirement communities could benefit significantly from spending time with pets.

"Our research has identified a number of social and mental health benefits associated with interacting with pets and there are many studies that show specific benefits to older people from having contact with pets," says Dr Lisa Wood from the University of Western Australia.

One study looked at residents in 37 nursing homes and found that those who had access to pets were happier than those who didn't.

"The groups that were visited by pets had statistically significant increases in feeling enthusiastic, attentive, interested and inspired," says Dr Wood.



Justine Levine with her Staffordshire bull terrier cross Archie Adams. 'He knows that when we get home then it is off for a walk to the off-leash park up the road,' Justine says.

PICTURE: KEVIN FARMER