



Healthwatch

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Cat and dog ownership saved \$3.86 billion in national health expenditure in 1999-2000

'People who have pets are seen as more trustworthy'

Animal attraction

Alice Berry

YOUR neighbours should thank you for owning a dog, because it's probably making them healthier and happier, according to an Australian study.

The study found the benefits of owning pets extended beyond their immediate owners to the wider community.

Dogs in particular increased the likelihood of their owners meeting other people within their street and suburb.

Of those who walked their dog, 84 per cent of people talked to other pet owners on the way.

"Dogs are the main pets who get out of the house, so they are facilitators of social contact," said Dr Lisa Wood, of the University of

Western Australia.

She said a common view among survey participants was that pets served as an icebreaker and a neutral topic of conversation.

While other studies had focused on the health benefits to owners, Dr Wood said an important finding of her study was that it was not just owners who benefited.

Other people in the neighbourhood enjoyed meeting people with dogs and liked seeing dog-walkers around the streets, she said.

Dr Wood said visible pet owners, especially dog-walkers, gave non-pet owners a sense of safety on their streets.

She said nearly two-thirds of Australian households had pets, outnumbering homes with children.

And 37 per cent of households owned a dog.

Dr Wood's study found

40 per cent of pet owners had got to know other people in their suburb through their pet.

And 76 per cent said owning a dog encouraged them to walk in their suburb more frequently.

"From people's anecdotes, we saw that a lot of people own pets and if they see a pet owner they have something in common," Dr Wood said.

"People who have pets are seen as more trustworthy."

She said pets acted as a catalyst for interaction between neighbours in the form of an exchange of favours.

"With neighbours, there is kind of an initial shyness," Dr Wood said.

"Often a little favour exchange will lead to a relationship between neighbours ... they'll look after a pet and then perhaps the

kids later on."

Her study surveyed 339 people in three Perth suburbs. Dr Wood said owning a pet could be described as "social capital".

"Social capital is about networks, trust and relationships between people that bind them together," she said.

Dr Wood said it was the social glue that held communities together and was often described as a sense of community.

The study found the potential negative consequences of having pets in suburban neighbourhoods, such as barking and dog bites, was minimal compared with the benefits of pet ownership, including the social contact animals generated for their owners.

PERFECT COMPANIONS



Compared with people without pets, pet owners:

- Typically visit the doctor less often and use less medication
- Have lower cholesterol and lower blood pressure on average
- Recover more quickly from illness and surgery
- Deal better with stressful situations
- Are less likely to report feeling lonely