

## The health benefits of dog ownership



It's hard to pick up a newspaper or go to an online news website and not read something about New Zealand's faltering healthcare system. Funding for, and access to, health care seems to be an enduring problem.

What better time to talk about the health benefits of dog ownership? Let's consider the simple act of taking your dog for regular walks. Walking is a weight-bearing exercise which is recommended for women to combat osteoporosis, for example. Pick up your pace and it's an aerobic exercise, too. The endorphin release from being outdoors in the fresh air helps to support mental health as well.

In a study funded by Purina (New Study Reveals the Many Benefits of Having a Dog, [purina.co.uk](http://purina.co.uk)), 69% of dog owners surveyed in the UK felt that their fitness had improved through the act of taking their dog for regular walks, and 79% of dog owners agreed that owning a dog has encouraged them to become more active outdoors.

There are also documented studies of dogs being a 'social lubricant,' breaking down barriers so people can interact positively with

one another. These effects have been seen in working groups such as office situations as well as with children who have been diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorders. Having a dog present gives people something to focus on, developing rapport.

Last year, in the USA, the Human Animal Bond Research Institute commissioned an economic impact report to quantify the health benefits of pet ownership. The study found that pet ownership contributes to a savings of a whopping US\$22.7 billion each year.

In the report entitled *The Health Care Cost Savings of Pet Ownership*, savings were itemised in a range of health care areas including:

- US\$15 billion, because pet owners visit the doctor less than non-pet owners
- US\$4.5 billion for reduced spending on obesity and its impacts, because dog owners regularly walk their dogs which helps to combat weight gain
- US\$672 million in savings for households with children, because they have a 9% lower probability of developing anxiety disorders when there's a pet in the

household, saving on demands for mental health support

- US\$1.8 billion for the health care provided to older people who, with pets, are less likely to suffer the ill health connected to social isolation and loneliness

With a growing body of knowledge about the health benefits of pet ownership, perhaps one of the keys to solving New Zealand's health care crisis lies in providing greater support for and promotion of dog ownership? 🐾

### Animal MRI Facility Closure

In the September 2022 issue of *NZ Dog World*, I wrote about the dedicated animal MRI facility opening in Christchurch. Sadly, this facility was closed at the end of 2023.

Terry McLaughlin, Group Chief Executive Officer of RHCNZ Medical Imaging Group, reports, "Our MRI pet service in Christchurch was short-lived, but certainly worth a go. We did not get the referrals we anticipated and there was no indication this was going to change in the near- or medium-term."