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Pet project: The healing power of animals

Animal therapy relieves stress, anxiety, and can help you live longer.

A dog is man's (and woman's) best friend, especially when it comes to good health. Research continues to show that regular interactions with dogs, or any pet or animal for that matter, can have immediate and long-lasting impact on your emotional well-being.

"Animal, or pet, therapy, is one of the easiest and most fulfilling means to combat the depression, anxiety, and loneliness that so often confront older adults," says Erin Rice, director of the animal assistance therapy program for UCLA Health.



Regular interactions with animals have a lasting impact on your emotional health.

The science of animals

Animal therapy is commonly used in hospitals and retirement centers to help patients cope with the stress of treatment and recovery. The interactions usually involve dogs and cats in either individual or group settings. "The visits often last anywhere from five to 30 minutes and can involve anything from petting to giving treats to just sitting on the bed with the person," says Rice.

The effects can be quite powerful. Recent research from Mount Sinai Hospital found that therapy dogs can have a significant impact on the well-being of cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy and radiation therapy. In addition to facing extreme fatigue from the treatments, they battle constant stress and fear.

In the six-week study, 42 patients received daily 15- to 20-minute animal-assisted visits. After the animal therapy,

the patients reported a significant improvement in their quality of life, and the presence of the therapy dogs helped them overcome anxiety in order to complete their treatments.

What happens when you interact with animals? Researchers point to increased levels of oxytocin, the so-called "love hormone" produced by the brain that is connected to stronger social bonding.

A review of 69 studies on human-animal interactions showed that contact with animals, especially one's own pet, increases oxytocin production, which counters elevated levels of stress and anxiety. The

results also suggested that while single meetings with animals trigger the oxytocin effects, stable relationships, like pet ownership or at least regular interactions, are linked to more potent and longer-lasting effects.

Research also has found animal encounters increase production of serotonin, the feel-good brain chemical that helps maintain mood balance, which is why petting animals can have a calming effect.

Finding your own pet therapy

You can replicate the same mind-soothing effects of animal therapy on you own.

While adopting a dog or cat is one way (see sidebar, page 7), if you are not ready for that responsibility, you can seek out other means of animal interaction.

For instance, inquire with your local senior community center and libraries about public animal therapy programs they

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NEWS BRIEFS

**Zinc deficiency linked to weaker immune response in older adults**

About 40 percent of those age 65 and older have a zinc deficiency, and a new study shows this affects how the body heals. The research from Oregon State University discovered that low levels of zinc were linked to increased chronic inflammation and lower amounts of IL-6 methylation (IL-6). IL-6 is activated to stimulate an immune response during an infection or trauma, especially for burns or other tissue damage. Zinc is naturally found in protein-rich foods, such as meat and shellfish like oysters. Older adults tend to eat fewer zinc-rich foods and their bodies do not use or absorb the mineral too well. The reason for this is not clear, says Emily Ho, PhD, of the Linus Pauling Institute at Oregon State. There is not an established test for zinc deficiency, so your best bet is to aim for the recommended daily allowance (RDA). For women, it is 8 milligrams (mg) and 11 mg for men. "There are no guidelines specifically for seniors, but they should get at least the RDA, but less than the upper limit of 40 mg per day," says Dr. Ho. Food is the best source, but zinc supplements also can help reach your daily amount. Be sure to check with your physician before beginning any new supplementation to determine your proper dosage.

New blood clot removal device improves outcomes for certain stroke patients

A new device to remove blood clots can improve outcomes for people who suffer an acute ischemic stroke, in which a clot blocks the blood supply to part of the brain, reports a UCLA-led study. The findings represent the first new treatment for acute ischemic stroke in 20 years since the development of the clot-dissolving drug tPA, says Jeffrey Saver, MD, director of the UCLA Stroke Center. The study enrolled 196 people and tested a stent clot retrieval device called Solitaire. The patients were treated within six hours of the onset of stroke symptoms with either tPA alone, or tPA along with stent retrieval of the clot. The findings showed that the combination of the Solitaire and tPA outperformed tPA alone. Other advantages: Three months after having a stroke, 60 percent who received both clot retrieval and tPA were functionally independent and free from disability, compared with 35 percent who received only tPA. The Solitaire also opened the artery 88 percent of the time, even when there was a large clot, while tPA reopened vessels only 25 to 30 percent of the time. "The Solitaire also caused less bleeding and was able to more easily engage and entangle clots," says Dr. Saver. About one in 10 ischemic stroke patients can be taken to a catheter lab in time to perform the clot retrieval, according to the study. This means that about 60,000 stroke patients a year could benefit from the two-pronged treatment approach. The device is now available at major academic medical centers.

Blood-based test shows promise for early diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease

UCLA researchers have offered the first evidence that a simple blood test could confirm the presence of beta-amyloid proteins in the brain, a hallmark of Alzheimer's disease. While there is no cure for Alzheimer's, early diagnosis can mean early treatment before the disease becomes too advanced. Currently, Alzheimer's disease is often diagnosed through distinctive symptoms like memory loss. But another way is to measure levels of beta-amyloid and tau proteins in the cerebrospinal fluid and beta-amyloid build-up on the brain. There are two methods used to find these telltale markers, but each has significant drawbacks. One requires a spinal tap—an invasive procedure that can cause headaches, back pain, and, rarely, meningitis and/or nerve damage. The other, an amyloid PET scan, exposes the patient to radiation, and is often not covered by insurance. The blood test developed by the UCLA team helps to predict the presence of these blood proteins. This along with other information related to Alzheimer's, such as memory testing results and MRIs of the hippocampus, the brain region tied to forming memories, can more accurately confirm which patients have Alzheimer's pathology in their brain. "The blood test is also a fairly noninvasive procedure that can be done in outpatient settings and could be quite affordable," says lead researcher Diana Apostolova, MD. While more research is still needed, the blood test could accelerate the rate of early diagnosis and treatment as well as help identify patients for testing promising therapeutic interventions, she says. ■

Watching your prostate cancer

For many men, the best treatment may be doing less, not more.

Men diagnosed with prostate cancer usually face two treatment choices: radiation therapy or surgery to remove their prostate. But there are other options that may be better: watchful waiting and active surveillance (AS), in which you take a wait-and-see approach before deciding on a course of action.

“Aggressive treatments like surgery and radiation are, for many men with prostate cancer, like using a sledgehammer to kill a flea,” says Leonard S. Marks, MD, professor of urology at the UCLA School of Medicine. “The reality is that most men will die with prostate cancer rather than from it, and men need to weigh whether the effects of common treatments trump their quality of life.”

What is in a name?

Watchful waiting and AS get mentioned together, but they are different. Watchful waiting is typically for older men who do not want any treatments now or in the future unless they experience severe symptoms like bone pain and urinary obstruction.

“In other words, they are later in their life, and choose quality of life over possibly extending it,” says Dr. Marks.

AS, however, is more common. Patients tend to be younger (age 50 to 65 on average) and are felt to have non-lethal prostate cancers. “The majority of men being diagnosed today fall into this category,” says Dr. Marks. “In such a case, the condition is monitored until a serious cancer appears—which may be never. Monitoring may be by prostate-specific antigen (PSA) levels (*see sidebar, above*) and/or biopsy results.

It may seem counterproductive to go the AS route—why wait if you may eventually need treatment? But for many men it can be the best choice. “They don’t want to rush into radiation treatment that can have



Active surveillance has become a common choice for men with low-risk prostate cancer.

potential side effects, such as swollen skin, hair loss, and frequent urination,” says Dr. Marks. “Nor do they want to have surgery, which may lead to issues like erectile dysfunction or urinary incontinence.

“Sometimes their cancer may grow slowly, or not at all, so until a serious cancer becomes apparent, it is often best to monitor it and men can continue living as they normally do.”

Candidates for AS

AS works best in terms of longevity for those who are low-risk patients, according to new research from The American Society of Clinical Oncology. Their analysis of data on 945 men found that the 10- and 15-year overall survival rates were 83.6 and 68.8 percent for low-risk patients. In comparison, intermediate-risk men had lower survival rates of 68.4 and 50.3 percent, respectively.

Even if you are in the low-risk group, you still have to meet some criteria for AS to be a viable option, says Dr. Marks. For instance:

- ➔ **A PSA number below 20 ng/mL**, with the lower, the better.
- ➔ **A Gleason score of no higher than six**, or in selected cases 7. Gleason is a system of grading prostate cancer tissue from a biopsy that ranges from two to 10. The higher the number the more likely the cancer will grow and spread.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

PSA tests are part of any prostate cancer analysis:

- The test measures the PSA in your blood in nanograms per milliliter (ng/mL).
- Traditionally, results of less than 4.0 ng/mL are normal. Your risk of prostate cancer increases as the number rises.
- Men older than 50 have a 20 to 30 percent chance of having prostate cancer if their PSA level is between 4.1 and 10.
- A number higher than 10 increases the chance of cancer to 42 to 64 percent.

- ➔ **A PSA density below 0.15.** PSA density is the prostate’s volume measure by a transrectal prostate ultrasound. A low density means a large volume of prostate tissue is making little PSA and the scales tip in favor of a benign condition.
- ➔ **A small amount of tumor in the prostate biopsy tissue.**

AS also is not for men who want to be indifferent about their condition. You have to follow-up every six months for updated PSA tests, digital rectal exams, and usually periodic biopsies to see if the cancer has grown. “You can’t just walk away and forget about it,” says Dr. Marks.

Talk with your doctor

Even if AS is a good option, your doctor may not always recommend it. A 2014 survey found that 72 percent of specialists agreed that AS was an effective treatment for low-risk prostate cancer. However, only 22 percent would suggest it to their patients, instead opting for their area of treatment, either surgery or radiation.

This is why men need to be more proactive in their treatment strategy and always ask their doctor about all options—not just the one he would suggest.

“By following this course of action, it forces men to be more engaged about their prostate cancer, so they can begin to make smarter decisions about their future health,” says Dr. Marks. ■

Give your skin a close-up

How to treat and prevent four age-related skin conditions.

Skin changes are a normal part of aging. Over time, you may notice the sudden appearance of brown spots and moles. While most of these are harmless, seniors still need to closely monitor them, says Gary Chuang, MD, a dermatologist with UCLA Health. “They could cause skin irritation, and changes in appearance, size, and number may be an early sign of skin cancer.”

Dr. Chuang recommends that seniors get a full baseline skin examination from a dermatologist, and then follow up with annual visits. They should also conduct monthly self-examinations to note any new growths or changes in existing ones, and alert their doctor, if necessary.

Even if these skin conditions are not serious, they can be unattractive and bothersome. You can take steps to treat and prevent moles and brown spots, as well as other unsightly growths like warts and skin tags.

Moles Moles are clusters or spots on the skin that consist of cells called melanocytes, which give color to skin. They are usually dark brown, but can be reddish-brown, blue, or the color of skin. They vary in shape and size, but most are oval or round, and less than one-quarter-inch in diameter. Moles can be flat, raised, smooth, or wrinkled, and can develop on any area of the body. The average person has between 10 and 40 moles.

➔ **Treatment.** Most moles are harmless, but certain types carry a higher risk of becoming cancerous. See a dermatologist if you notice moles that become asymmetrical, have an irregular border, are uneven shades of brown, black, red, white, or blue, and are larger than one-quarter-inch in diameter. These may be warning signs of melanoma, the most serious type of skin cancer.

➔ **Prevention.** Sunlight increases the number of moles and makes them



Check ups from a dermatologist and monthly self-exams can help find potential skin cancer.

darker; sunburns raise the risk of melanoma. Protect yourself when outdoors by wearing broad spectrum sunscreen with a minimum 30 SPF (sun protection factor) and protective clothing, including wide-brimmed hats.

Brown spots Brown spots, also called age or liver spots, are flat, tan, brown or black spots that vary in size and appear on areas most exposed to the sun, like the face, hands, shoulders and arms. Although brown spots can look cancerous, most are harmless. Still, have your doctor evaluate spots that are quite dark, have unusual combinations of color, or have changed appearance and/or size, as they may be red flags for melanoma.

➔ **Treatment.** For cosmetic reasons, age spots can be lightened with over-the-counter and prescription skin-bleaching products, or removed with clinical treatments. Applying bleaching creams that contain hydroquinone, used alone or with a prescription retinoid cream with tretinoin, may fade spots over three to six months. Laser and intense pulsed-light therapies destroy melanin-producing cells to lighten the skin without damaging the skin's surface. (Treatments often require several sessions.) Another method is freezing, or cryotherapy, which involves applying liquid nitrogen or another freezing agent to the age spots to destroy the extra pigment. As the area heals, the skin appears lighter. (Keep in mind that your insurance may not cover any of these procedures.)

➔ **Prevention.** The easiest way is to avoid sun exposure and always use

Stay hydrated with food

Dehydration is a constant problem among older adults. One reason is that seniors need more fluids as they age. After age 60, the proportion of total body fluids drops to 52 percent in men and 46 percent in women. This is due to a decrease in muscle mass and a corresponding increase in fat cells.

Drinking enough water every day can be a challenge for many seniors. Aging affects a person's sense of taste, which can make drinking water unpleasant. Another issue is that seniors often do not recognize signs of mild dehydration, like cramping in the limbs, headaches, weakness, sleepiness, and irritability, which can make proper hydration tough to manage.

While the standard eight, 8-ounce glasses a day is not supported by science—it is just easy to remember—it is close to what seniors need daily (13 cups for men, nine for women). Where you get your water does not matter either. Coffee, tea, milk, and orange juice, all count toward your daily water intake. Another way is from foods, many of which contain a high percentage



of water per volume. For instance, eating two small Roma tomatoes at 95 percent water is equal to $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of water. Here are other high-water foods:

FOODS TO KEEP YOU HYDRATED

Food	% water
Zucchini and Celery	96
Watermelon, Strawberries, Spinach	92
Broccoli and Grapefruit	91
Carrots, Raspberries, Oranges	87
Blueberries and Yogurt	85
Apples and Pears	84

at least SPF 30 sunscreen on any exposed skin.

Warts Warts are noncancerous growths caused by a viral infection. They can develop almost anywhere on the body, but often show up on the hands (especially where the skin has been broken), feet, legs, and face. “Warts can easily bleed when traumatized, and the virus can potentially be transmitted through physical contact, or sharing personal items like towels, says Dr. Chuang. Some forms of squamous cell carcinoma, a type of skin cancer, look like warts in the beginning. If you have a wart that does not go away, see a dermatologist.

➔ **Treatment.** Warts sometimes go away on their own, but they should be removed if they are unsightly, painful, or bleed on a regular basis. One home remedy is to apply salicylic acid (contained in Compound W) to warts every day for several weeks. A doctor also can apply a chemical called cantharidin to destroy the wart, or use liquid nitrogen to freeze it. Two to four treatments over several weeks are often required.

➔ **Prevention.** Sometimes, warts can reappear as fast as they go away, which means the virus is still present. Treat new growths as soon as possible to prevent the leftover virus from infecting nearby skin.

Skin tags These are unsightly, yet benign, growths that stick out near the neck, armpits, breasts, groin, and other areas where there is a lot of skin friction. They are also common among people who are overweight. Skin tags are small, but some may be up to one-half-inch in length. They do not grow and are not cancerous; however, they can become irritated from rubbing against clothes or jewelry.

➔ **Treatment.** If you want skin tags removed, your doctor can freeze or burn them off with an electrical current. The treatments are minimally painful. “The pain can be reduced

with the use of topical or injectable anesthesia,” says Dr. Chuang. Because skin tags are benign, removal is considered cosmetic and not covered by insurance. The cost of the removal varies, so ask your dermatologist.

➔ **Prevention.** There is no prevention for skin tags. So unless they regularly become irritated, look unsightly, or change in color, size, composition, or sensitivity, there is no reason to treat or report them to your doctor. ■

DRUGS AND THE SUN

Some classes of medications can increase your sensitivity to sunlight and the risk of sunburn. You should be mindful of your sun exposure and take extra precautions if you take any of the following drugs. Also, consult with your doctor about whether you should alter your dosage or frequency if you plan to participate in regular outdoor activities over a long period, like when going on vacation. Note that these are only some examples of medications that may cause sun sensitivity, and is not an exhaustive list. If in doubt, ask your doctor or pharmacist about your medications.



DRUG CLASS	DRUG	BRAND
NSAIDS	Aspirin	Bayer
	Ibuprofen	Advil, Midol, Motrin
	Naproxen	Aleve, Anaprox
	Piroxicam	Feldene
ANTIHISTAMINES	Diphenhydramine	Benadryl
	Fexofenadine	Allegra
	Loratadine	Claritin
AUTOIMMUNE	Gold Sodium Thiomalate	Myochrysine
	Auranofin	Ridaura
	Methotrexate	Rheumatrex, Trexall
	Sulfasalazine	Azulfidine
ANTIHYPERTENSIVES	Hydroxychloroquine	Plaquenil
	Nifedipine	Adalat, Procardia, Nifediac
	Diltiazem	Cardizem, Dilacor, Diltiazem
	Captopril	Capoten
DIURETICS	Amlodipine	Norvasc
	Chlorothiazide	Diuril
	Furosemide	Lasix, Diaqua-2, Lo-Aqua
ANTIDEPRESSANTS (TRICYCLIC)	Hydrochlorothiazide	Aquazide, Microzide
	Amitriptyline	Elavil, Endep, Tryptanol, Vanatrip
	Nortriptyline	Aventyl, Pamelor
	Desipramine	Norpramin
ANTIBIOTICS	Imipramine	Tofranil
	Trazodone	Desyrel
	Tetracycline	Sumycin, Tetracyn
	Sulfa drugs	Bactrim, Septra
	Quinolones	Cipro, Levaquin
	Ofloxacin	Floxin
HYPOGLYCEMICS	Minocycline	Dynacin, Minocin
	Sulfonamides	Sulfatrim, Septra
	Doxycycline	Vibramycin
	Glipizide	Glipizide XL, Glucotrol
TOPICAL RETINOID	Tolbutamide	Orinase
	Isotretinoin	Accutane, Claravis, Myorisan
	Acitretin	Soriatane
	Tazarotene	Tazorac, Avage, Fabior
	Tretinoin	Retin-A, Atralin, Refissa, Avita

Yoga at any age yields big benefits

The mind-body practice may heal many health conditions.

An estimated 15.8 million American adults practice yoga, but only 18 percent are age 55 and older. If you are part of this minority group, you should consider rolling out the mat. Yoga has a wide range of benefits for seniors—from improving brain health to lowering their risk of heart disease.

“Yoga is unique compared to other forms of exercise because it combines

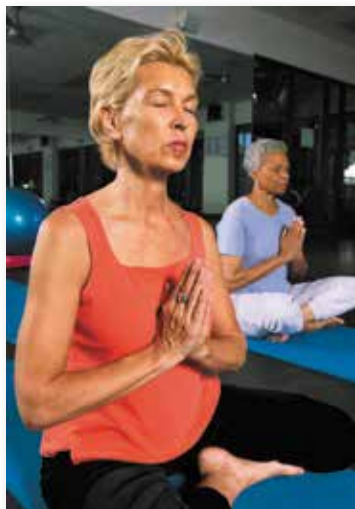
movement, meditation and mindfulness, and controlled breathing,” says Helen Lavretsky, MD, director of the UCLA Late-life Mood, Stress and Wellness Research Program. “And because there are different styles, you can easily find one that fits your personality, comfort level, needs, and limitations.”

Yoga for your health

Yoga has several mechanisms that can improve and even prevent many health issues and diseases common among seniors, says Lavretsky. “It is a great way to reduce the cost of medical care now and in the future,” she says. Here are some examples:

➔ **Brain and Memory Function.** A 2014 study found that practicing yoga three times per week for eight weeks helped older adults perform faster and more accurately on tests of information recall, mental flexibility, and task-switching than before. The researchers cited yoga’s emphasis on meditation and controlled breathing to help the brain’s ability to sustain attention.

➔ **Heart Health.** A recent review of 37 clinical trials showed that yoga may improve factors related to cardiovas-



Yoga blends movement with meditation, mindfulness, and breath awareness.

cular health comparable to aerobic exercise like speed walking. Specifically, those who did yoga, on average, lost five pounds, reduced five points off their blood pressure, and shaved 12 points from their bad LDL cholesterol. They also lowered their heart rate by more than five beats a minute.

➔ **Stress reduction.**

Yoga focuses on quieting the mind through medita-

tion and lowering anxiety through breathing techniques. “When you are more in control of your body and mind, you can learn to manage stress responses, so they do not affect you. You learn not to sweat the small stuff so much,” says Dr. Lavretsky.

➔ **Anxiety and Depression.** A yoga practice has been reported to help calm anxiety and manage depression symptoms. “Even a simple practice of deep breathing with three to six breaths per minute can lower anxiety levels, and paying attention to one’s breath offers the same calming effect as a quiet environment and pleasant music,” she says.

➔ **Rheumatoid Arthritis.** Yoga’s calming effect also can help reduce pain responses and lower inflammation. This combination in particular helps with diseases like rheumatoid arthritis (RA). One study showed that after only 12 gentle yoga sessions, people with RA reported improvements in their disease activity scores. “Yoga can help support the joints and movement to reduce stiffness, and because it can be modified to the individual, it is often easier to do than other forms of exercise that can be challenging,” says Dr. Lavretsky.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Not ready for a regular yoga class? Get more familiar through online video classes.

- **Myyogaworks.com**—This free site has 5- to 90-minute routines with an emphasis in areas like low back, balance, and hips.
- **Yogaglo.com**—Offers more than 2,500 classes with many top teachers. After a 15-day free trial, cost for unlimited access is \$18 per month.
- **Doyogawithme.com**—The free site offers programs designed specifically for seniors, including chair yoga routines.
- **Yoga4seniors.com**—Offers basic intro and training specifically for seniors.
- **Yogajournal.com**—Learn about yoga terminology and beginner poses.

➔ **Urinary Incontinence (UI).** Women with UI who took part in a six-week yoga program experienced an overall 70 percent reduction in the frequency of urine leakage, according to a study from the University of California, San Francisco. Because UI is linked with anxiety and depression, women with UI may benefit from yoga’s emphasis on mindfulness and relaxation as well as the physical movements that can help strengthen pelvic floor muscles.

Choose your style

Beginning a yoga practice is easy. There are many options available based on your age, comfort level, and physical limitations.

Here are some tips to help you find a class and style that best meets your needs and interests:

- **Many gyms offer “silver” yoga classes designed for older adults.** Most integrate slow, gentle movements with a mixture of both standing and sitting poses and conscious breathing exercises.
- **Check with your local YMCA, community senior center, or even hospital.** “Most offer various types of gentle or restorative yoga classes

designed for seniors with physical limitations or that are less demanding than traditional yoga classes,” says Dr. Lavretsky.

- **Hatha and Iyengar yoga are all-around styles adopted by many yoga studios and gym classes.**

These styles place a greater emphasis on proper body alignment and balance. They also rely on props such as straps, bolsters, and blocks to help with support and reduce the risk of strain or injury.

- **Certain yoga styles might be better suited for older adults.** For instance, chair yoga, in which all the movements are practiced while sitting in or using a chair

for support, is ideal if you have mobility or balance problems.

- **Kundalini yoga focuses more on breath work and meditation.** Its use of easy postures also makes it less physically demanding than other styles.

“Yoga does not need to take much time, either. You can do quality routines in three to 10 minutes at home,” says Dr. Lavretsky. Yoga classes are also affordable, with prices ranging from about \$10 to \$20 per class.

A change in your life

A regular yoga practice can carry over to other aspects of your life, too. “As you become more tuned in with

your body and mind through yoga, you will be more aware of how your lifestyle affects your health,” says Dr. Lavretsky. “Don’t be surprised if you begin to closely examine your diet, your sleep patterns, and how you take care of yourself.”

It may take time to adjust to yoga, so don’t give up if there is not an immediate connection. “Sometimes you have to try different styles, teachers, or settings until you find one you feel comfortable with,” she adds.

“Yoga is not a sport, and there is no competition. You work with your body and within your abilities. In this way, it can be an ideal lifestyle program for almost all seniors.” ■

Animal Therapy—cont. from page 1

may host. Another option is to volunteer with community partners of animal therapy organizations like Pet Partners (petpartners.org), Therapy Dogs International (tdi-dog.org), and The Good Dog Foundation (thegooddogfoundation.org), where you can volunteer to help with animal therapy training.

“Franchise stores like PetSmart and Petco also host adoption days when you can mingle with animals,” says Rice. “You don’t have to adopt one, but it is a great way to interact.”

You can always volunteer at local animal shelters, rescue operations, or even horse stables. “This can help you spend time with different types of animals, like birds, horses, and

other marine and wildlife,” says Rice. “You help clean, feed, brush, or just hang out with them.”

And don’t forget to lend a hand to a friend or neighbor who has a pet. “Offer to walk their dog when they are at work, or care for their cat when they go on vacation,” says Rice. “You can help them and their pet can help you.” ■

DOG WALKERS ARE MORE ACTIVE AND SOCIAL

While any kind of animal interaction is healthy, dog ownership can keep you more active. A study from Michigan State University discovered that people who owned and walked their dogs were 34 percent more likely to meet the recommended 150 minutes of weekly physical activity. One reason

is that dogs force you to walk more. A 2013 study found that dog owners/dog walkers spent nearly 50 percent more total walking time than two non-dog-walking groups. If you need to strengthen your social life, dog walkers have been found to converse more with people when out with their pet. And if you have suffered a heart attack, a dog may help you live longer. A study by the National Institutes of Health examined 421 adults who suffered heart attacks and found that after a year, those who were dog owners were more likely to still be alive compared with non-dog owners, regardless of the severity of their heart attacks.



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

Thinking of adopting a dog or cat from a shelter? Here are questions to consider

- How much care does the dog or cat need? Some breeds or mix of breeds may need extra medical care.
- How do they respond to other animals and people? For example, some may not like men or people in hats.
- What training needs are required, like house training or learning to walk on a leash?
- What is the animal’s energy level? Does it match your mobility level and lifestyle?
- Can your budget afford pet food, grooming, annual vaccinations, flea and tick prevention, etc.?



Editor-in-Chief
Bruce A. Ferrell,
MD, Professor of
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Q I take calcium supplements to ward off osteoporosis. If I double the dosage, can I further reduce my chances of getting broken bones?

A By no means should you ever take extra doses of any vitamin or mineral unless prescribed by your doctor. As with most things, too much can be harmful, and calcium is one of them. Some evidence suggests that too much calcium intake from supplements can pose an increased risk of heart attack and stroke. It can also trigger formation of kidney stones, cause muscle aches, and affect your mood. You did not mention the amount of calcium supplements you are taking, but I encourage you to get as much of your calcium as possible from food sources. Many calcium-fortified foods are available, like most commercial orange juice and breakfast cereals. Also, in addition to high-calcium dairy products, foods like spinach, beans, and canned fish like sardines are excellent calcium sources. If you must supplement, remember that you must balance your calcium intake with sufficient vitamin D to aid calcium absorption. If you follow current sunscreen recommendations, you may not get enough sunshine to produce your own vitamin D, so you should seek out D-fortified foods like milk, salmon, and orange juice (but check the label as amounts of added vitamin D vary). Vitamin D supplements also may be an option, but they carry risks too, so consult with your doctor.

Q I have a lifetime of sun exposure. Is there anything I can do now to protect myself from further damage?

A The best thing you can do now is to be vigilant about protection against any further exposure. Stay inside or at least in the shade from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m., when the sun's rays are most intense. Always apply a broad-spectrum (protects against both UVA and UVB rays) sunscreen to any exposed skin before you step outside. You would be surprised at the life-

time cumulative amount of sun exposure during the time it takes to walk to your car or across a parking lot to the store. Even when driving, your face and window-side arm and hand are exposed. Senior skin can be delicate, so choose sunscreen for sensitive skin that is para-aminobenzoic acid (PABA) free, as PABA may cause skin allergies. The SPF (sun protection factor) of your broad-spectrum sunscreen should be at least 30. Reapply liberally and often. Use your clothing as a shield too: Always wear a hat that shades both your face and neck. Although light cotton clothing may be more comfortable, dark-colored synthetics offer better protection. Finally, to account for all your sun exposure to date, see a dermatologist for a full-body check for any precancerous lesions or irregular moles (*see page 4*).

Q My husband and I are in our mid 60s, and our sex life has waned in recent years. Is it even worth trying at our age?

A Absolutely! More older people continue to enjoy active sex lives well into their 70s and 80s, according to new research from The University of Manchester. More than half (54 percent) of men and almost one-third (31 percent) of women older than 70 reported they were still sexually active. In addition to the emotional benefits you gain from physical intimacy, your overall health can benefit as well. Just as with aerobic exercise, sex is good for the heart and overall circulatory system. Hormonal responses to sexual intercourse trigger endorphin production, your body's own pain killers. Studies have shown that sex can help diminish pain from arthritis and headaches. After menopause, women experience changes in vaginal tissues and structure, and regular sexual activity can help keep natural lubrication and sensitive vaginal tissue closer to pre-menopause conditions. Check with your doctor to make sure you are both healthy enough for sex. But other than perhaps needing to accommodate some physical changes that come with aging, you should both continue to enjoy sex as long as possible. ■

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