

Health & Fitness 2012

SPECIAL SECTION 2012

OUR FURRY FRIENDS

The health benefits of pet ownership

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Hearing the pitter-patter of furry little feet, the melodic notes of a birdcall or the gurgling sounds of a fish tank filter should do more than simply stir visions of pet treats and fun. There are studies confirming that owning a pet is good for your health and mental well-being.

Studies have cited the benefits of pet ownership for heart attack recovery, depression, hypertension and even fitness. Pets provide socialization opportunities, a feeling of companionship and a purpose to "get of bed" in the morning, and they are terrific icebreakers and conversation starters. Researchers and statistics say that heart attack patients who have pets survive longer than those without, according to several studies. Male pet owners have fewer signs of heart disease, e.g., lower triglyceride and cholesterol levels, than non-owners.

Stress -- and these are stressful times -- can throw off your body's natural chemistry and cause "illnesses" such as malignant hypertension. Malignant hypertension presents with a significantly high blood pressure and feelings of discomfort and pressure; it is a true medical emergency. However, petting an animal or participating in a pleasurable, relaxing activity can raise levels of serotonin and dopamine, chemicals that help to unwind and soothe. People in high-stress and demanding jobs had lower blood pressure readings in stressful situations after adopting a pet than did their counterparts without pets.

All pets offer the common health benefits of reducing stress, including fish, birds, reptiles, hamsters, etc., but some animals lend themselves to cuddling and playing. There are added benefits to owning dogs and cats or other animals that encourage physical interaction. For example, a nightly walk with a dog on a leash is good exercise that helps keep you fit and lowers triglycerides and cholesterol. Pet ownership also opens doors to greater socializing. Conversations start up between dog owners as they discuss breeds and care of their pups.

All too often, well-meaning parents have made their homes pet-free zones to eliminate the possibility of allergies and illnesses for their children. But statistics show that up to 33 percent of infants and young children showed less tendency toward animal allergies when they were raised in homes with a furry critter. Children learn to interact with pets and develop social skills. Having and caring for a pet gives a child a chance to develop responsibility, but the child should never be the sole caretaker.

The Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology quoted University of Wisconsin-Madison researcher and pediatrician James E. Gern,

M.D., as saying, "A growing number of studies have suggested that kids growing up in a home with 'furred animals' -- whether it's a pet cat or dog, or on a farm and exposed to large animals -- will have less risk of allergies and asthma." There is also less incidence of eczema and stronger immune systems when children are raised with dogs in the home.

There is a great sense of companionship for elderly pet owners where family has grown up and moved away or members have passed on. Owning a pet that has to be cared for, fed regularly and played with enforces a routine and gives purpose. Pets also have a way of reducing anxiety and soothing respiratory functions, which are important benefits for our elders.

For years, individuals and organizations have visited hospitals and senior assisted-living residences with dogs or cats in tow. In

health care institutions, the animals help decrease pain by allowing the patients to focus on something other than themselves. They stimulate memories, encourage speech and motivate physical activity. Researchers have also discovered that patients who are regularly visited by therapy pets are often much more willing to accept medical care and are more optimistic about their survival.

While owning a pet may decrease anxiety and related ailments, owning too many pets may also add stress as the cost of their care increases. Be realistic when making your decision to bring an animal into the house. Withholding a pet from someone who wants one could be a source of distress, as well. Prospective pet owners should choose animals with whom they feel most comfortable. Pet ownership is a very personal decision that reflects an individual preference.



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BALANCE TRAINING

Strengthen core muscles through balance training

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This summer, at the IDEA World Fitness Convention in San Diego, thousands of fitness experts and authorities converged to explore and assess the newest trends in fitness classes and methods. According to their 2011 IDEA Fitness Programs and Equipment Trends Report, balance training was the No. 1 trend. According to last year's IDEA survey, 95 percent of fitness trainers incorporated balance training into their workouts.

*What Is Balance Training?

Balance training creates a better sense of balance through the strengthening of core muscles. This includes the large and small muscles of the legs, gluteus, back and upper body. For instance, if you're standing on one leg, an entire range of major and minor muscles and tendons throughout all the lower body and core activate in different ways than they would if you were standing on both feet. Strengthening these muscles improves your overall balance abilities.

In a balance-building workout, prop-free movements, such as standing on one leg, squatting or lunging, use your body weight as you slightly shift your balance to remain upright. Yoga is another fitness activity that

builds balance as you progress through a routine.

To intensify a balance workout by working muscles and connective tissue in a range of ways, balance-centric equipment has burst onto the scene. At the IDEA convention, the new generation of balance equipment ranked No. 1 in the group's 2011 survey of top equipment trends. Kathie Davis, IDEA's executive director, says that the popularity of new forms of balance equipment is "a reflection of fitness professionals being creative enough to keep training fun and interesting with new tools. The (fitness) industry must be constantly evolving and innovating or we're going to lose people. As clients demand more 'fun,' we will see those types of equipment gain popularity."

Standing on one leg isn't exactly fun, at least not for very long, so designing minds of the fitness industry have invented and evolved the following balance-building equipment:

--BOSU balance trainer. This balance tool is made of molded plastic and weighted rubber. It has one flat side and one rounded, ball-like side. Originally, the name BOSU was an acronym for "Both Sides Up." It meant that the BOSU Balance Trainer could be used on either side -- dome or platform. Presently, the acronym BOSU has progressed beyond the product to now mean "Both Sides Utilized." The user may stand on the platform side to work out or step or



DON'T SIT!

Staying active at work is key to staying healthy

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We've all been there before. After sitting at your desk for five hours straight, your vision starts to get blurry, your fingers are covered in potato chip grease, and your thoughts are getting derailed every time someone walks into your office. When you leave for the night, you can't help but think: "Ugh. I feel gross and unhealthy."

It seems that more and more workers are becoming tethered to their desks, unmovable from their computers and phone systems. While this may increase the productivity of a company, it also can decrease the health of the workers. Many studies have shown that sedentary office environments lead to health complications.

A report out of the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research has found that sitting at a desk for long periods of time increases the risk of colorectal cancers by 200 percent. A 20-year Nurses' Healthy Study of 72,000 female nurses showed that for those who walked three hours a week, their risk of breast cancer was reduced greatly.

According to a 2006 University of Michigan study, the percentage of people who exercised regularly from

1980 to 2000 remained the same, but the amount of people who spent time sitting (especially at their desks) rose by 8 percent. The more hours per day you sit at your desk, the higher likelihood of your dying an early death from a variety of health-related issues, including diabetes and heart disease.

This is what Steve Bordley is trying to battle. He is CEO at TrekDesk, a company that creates desks that can be placed over a treadmill so workers can walk on the treadmill during their workday. After an accident rendered Bordley temporarily inactive, he gained weight and his cholesterol levels shot through the roof. This was when his brainchild was born. He found that just from walking during the day, he lost 25 pounds, cured his back pain and lowered his cholesterol. It was as simple as walking.

"Our whole goal is just to start a movement revolution," says Bordley. He points to the surgeon general's recommendation of 10,000 steps a day as the key to a healthier America. "The American Heart Association says that if you walk those 10,000 steps a day, we'd reduce initial heart attack rates by 90 percent," he says.

But how do workers walk during the day if they need to create spreadsheets and presentations? That's where the TrekDesk comes in. By placing a desk over the treadmill, the worker can continue to perform while

walking.

While the idea is simple enough, there is still some hesitation to "exercising" while on the job. People don't want to sweat. That seems to be the common misconception, says Bordley. He adds that you only walk about 1 to 1.5 miles per hour while using a treadmill and associated desk. A person can walk the 10,000-step minimum put out by the surgeon general in two to three hours while on a treadmill.

TrekDesk's treadmill desk has a price tag of \$479, and to use it, one has to have a treadmill and, more importantly, the space to put a treadmill in an office. If your cubicle doesn't allow this, there are other ways to stay active while at work.

According to the Mayo Clinic, one suggestion is to look for opportunities during the day to stand. This could include standing while on the phone (a technique Bordley suggests for everyone) or even getting a standing desk (where you stand instead of sit).

Another good idea is to take regular breaks and move around during the day; avoid extended periods of time sitting at your desk. Instead of hanging out at the water cooler, take a walk around the office or down the hall. Climb a few flights of stairs to get your heart rate up. If you have colleagues who are up for it, create walking meetings, where instead of sitting around a



QUICK RESULTS Can fast programs really work?

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When Erin Buckingham wanted to tone and sculpt her arms, she chose The Hundred Pushups program, which, she says, "seemed like a great way to challenge" herself "and get results."

She completed the six-week exercise challenge, which required participants to do sets of pushups at least three days a week, each time increasing the number of repetitions. Buckingham often did the program four or five days a week.

"It takes about five minutes tops a day and is so easy to fit into your schedule," she says. "I usually did them before I went to bed, just on my floor. No gym needed."

Buckingham recommends the program, which she still does a few times a week.

"You cannot just go for six weeks, stop and still expect to look the same," she says. "It's a thing that you need to do somewhat consistently."

*Quick Fixes?

Whether you want to lose weight or tone up, quick result workouts can be tempting.

Aside from The Hundred Pushups program, there are lots of other quick results programs to consider, including the Hula Hoop Workout, a 30-minute workout where you try to get fit while having fun twisting and turning with a hula hoop; The Fifty Pull-Ups Challenge, which involves seven weeks of training that results in being able to do 50 pull-ups; and playing Wii Fit Plus video games to help you get in shape while also gaming.

"We are an instant gratification society," says personal trainer Amy Mac. "We want to work hard at the gym today and slip into our skinny jeans tomorrow."

These programs may be intriguing, but fitness experts say that fast rewards are not always a good thing. "You don't get out of shape overnight, so you can't get in shape overnight," explains Jonathan Ross, author of "Abs Revealed" and spokesman for the American Council on Exercise, a nonprofit organization that promotes safe and effective exercise.

Ross explains that many quick-result programs have too narrow a focus, which doesn't provide long-lasting results. Mac agrees, saying, "If you don't make fitness a priority in your daily life, you will always

FLEXITARIAN LIFESTYLE

Changing the amount of meat in your diet

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One of the new buzzwords in nutrition is "flexitarian." According to Dawn Jackson Blatner, author of "The Flexitarian Diet," "the term means a 'flexible vegetarian,' which refers to a vegetarian who occasionally decides to eat meat." Often, says Blatner, this decision is in response to a social situation, such as a vegetarian who decides to eat turkey on Thanksgiving or a hamburger at a barbecue.

Along the same lines, meat eaters who decide to eat more vegetarian options -- for example, a meatless meal several times a week -- also count as flexitarians. According to fitness advocate Carole Carson, an estimated 30 to 40 percent of meat eaters opt occasionally for vegetarian meals.

"Really, a person who wakes up in the morning wanting to be more vegetarian can be called a flexitarian," Blatner says. "It's a personal choice. A vegetarian may decide to occasionally have steak or chicken in a salad, and a meat eater may decide to opt more often for bean fajitas rather than steak fajitas."

At the center of flexitarianism is being pro-plant, not anti-meat. Blatner says there are tremendous benefits to decreasing meats and increasing plant-based foods.

"With a greater consumption of healthy plant-based foods, disease risk decreases," she says. "That can help prevent cancer, diabetes (and) heart disease and lower cholesterol and high blood pressure. It's exciting news, very powerful stuff."

When physicians suggest healthier diets, it's often easier for people who eat primarily meat-based meals and unhealthy snacks to make the change by easing into the flexitarian lifestyle. And many vegetarians enjoy allowing themselves the freedom to enjoy a salad with chicken on it, taste a relative's signature dish at a special celebration or have a hot dog at the ballpark.

According to Blatner, there are three main steps you should take if you would like to try flexitarianism:

1) Eat what you currently eat, but re-portion your meals. "Eat half as much as your usual portion of a meat-based meal, and add more vegetables to your plate," Blatner says. A small amount of meat

remains to allow you to enjoy the taste you're familiar with; it's just paired with healthy greens and vegetables.

2) Reinvent your old favorites. "If you normally have turkey meat in your pasta sauce, replace the turkey with white beans," Blatner says. The spices in your recipe turn this into a delicious new option. Instead of a beef burrito, choose a black bean burrito to be more plant-based. Blatner shares the formula for optimal meat replacement: "For every ounce of meat you take out of a dish, substitute a quarter-cup of beans."

3) Refresh your repertoire of favorite recipes. Variety makes flexitarianism easier and more enjoyable, and family members will be more willing to sit down to pro-plant meals when you've added a dash of creativity to them. "Check out new vegetarian magazines, and talk to friends and family members about their favorite meatless recipes," Blatner says. Ask about homemade dishes, as well as what vegetarian and flexitarian friends order at local restaurants. You may find that a veggie burger at a local eatery is quite amazing, especially when topped with guacamole.

Expanding your horizons with food options is immensely easy on recipe websites, such as Allrecipes.com.

It's empowering to take charge of your health, and a flexible approach to adding more plant-based foods gradually into your diet can be more successful than a drastic elimination of meats. "If I said 'no meats anymore,' my husband would be sneaking off to fast-food restaurants," says retiree Anne Pasteur. "He's not going to give up his steaks, but what he has noticed is that he's happy with a few slices of sirloin and a half-plate of steamed broccoli and cauliflower with a lemon

vinaigrette on it." Each pro-plant decision you make can improve your health. And if you're a beginning vegetarian or an established vegetarian who has experienced meal disappointment at social events and holidays, the chance to add a low-fat meat option to your plate also counts as improving your quality of life.

If you'd like to explore this new twist to your diet, check out Blatner's book and flexitarian diet information at her website (<http://DawnJacksonBlatner.com>).

