

## Q. Can service and support animals improve your health?

**A.** Yes! You've probably seen a service dog help someone who is blind or has a disability.<sup>1</sup> The dog performs specific tasks.<sup>2</sup> It helps the person get around or cross the street. But that's not all they can do.

Dogs are the most common service animal. But pretty much any animal can provide emotional support and improve health. Cats, fish, birds, rabbits—you name it! You can register a pig, ferret, or monkey if they help you feel less depressed or anxious. But you can't take them anywhere you want.

Only service dogs are recognized by the Americans with Disabilities Act, and allowed in places like stores, businesses, and public buildings.

Service and emotional support animals can make a difference. Here are 5 ways:

### 1. Increase physical activity

Got a trained service dog? You're probably more active than people without a dog. Research shows that dog owners get about 350 minutes of exercise per week.<sup>3</sup> Non-dog owners only get about 159 minutes a week. Take Fido for a walk, OK?

### 2. Manage diabetes

Did you know dogs can be trained to recognize low blood sugar levels? About 100 million people in the U.S. have diabetes or pre-diabetes. A service dog can sense low blood sugar levels. When it does, it will warn its owner to test blood sugar levels, take medicine, or get help.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Improve mental health

There's a reason support animals are sometimes referred to as a "best friend." Research shows



that animals can provide a source of comfort that helps reduce anxiety, depression, loneliness, and other mental health issues.<sup>5</sup> Don't have a pet? Visit a friend with a pet or volunteer at an animal shelter.

### 4. Reduce stress

Feeling stressed out? You're not alone. About 79 percent of all adults feel stressed out every day, according to a recent Gallup Poll. So how do you manage stress? Healthy options might include yoga, exercise, meditation, and journaling. And there's at least one more. Pet a dog or cat. Research shows that petting a dog or cat for just 10 minutes reduces the stress hormone cortisol.<sup>6</sup>

### 5. Lower blood pressure

What do 1 in 3 Americans have in common? High blood pressure. It's a major risk factor for the leading cause of death in the U.S...heart disease. How do you control blood pressure? Exercise. Eat more plant-based foods. Maintain a healthy weight. Reduce stress. Taking care of a pet may help, too. The American Heart Association found that pet owners tend to have lower blood pressure and lower risk for heart disease than non-pet owners.<sup>7</sup>

## ASK THE Wellness DOCTOR

If you want to improve your health, it's important to make smart lifestyle choices, exercise, eat healthy, and follow your doctor's advice. You shouldn't rush out and get a service dog or support animal. But research shows a furry friend can improve your health. Woof!

### References

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