



IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME 3



WHEN TO GO TO THE ER 4



CHRONIC PAIN IN WOMEN 6

bottomline HEALTH

Actionable advice you can trust from top wellness experts Jul/Aug 2023 Vol 37 | No 7&8 | \$12

This Month's ACTION PLAN

- **Prepare for emergencies.** A few simple preparations can make a visit to the emergency room less stressful. Keep an updated file containing your physician reports, test results, allergies, and current medications, and take it with you. Don't forget to take a book, phone, and phone charger. *(page 4)*
- **Vacation safely.** If you're planning a trip outside of the United States, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website to research the required and recommended vaccinations for your destination, and to understand any potential non-vaccine preventable diseases. It's important to be up to date on all your vaccinations at least a month prior to your departure. *(page 27)*
- **Build a team.** If you experience chronic pain, one doctor might not be enough. Assemble an interdisciplinary team of health-care professionals that may include a rheumatologist, pain specialist, orthopedist, physical therapist, and more. Ask friends, family, and your primary care doctor for referrals. *(page 6)*
- **Learn CPR.** Knowing CPR can be a lifesaver for those close to you. Fully virtual first-aid classes are available, but taking an in-person class can give you a greater sense of confidence. You'll be able to feel the correct hand placement and the timing and depth of chest compressions. *(page 14)*



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Rover Rx

From preventing heart attacks to easing stress—a pet can be your health's best friend.



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What's one of the strongest prescriptions for better health? According to decades of scientific research, it may be owning a pet. There is a wide range of proven health benefits.

Better heart health. In a study published in the *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, researchers looked at health data from more than 2,000 people collected over five years. On average, those who owned a pet—particularly a dog—had higher cardiovascular health scores. In another study, from researchers at the Stanford Cardiovascular Institute at Stanford University in California, dog owners had a 31 percent lower risk of dying from heart-related problems

compared to nonowners—and a 65 percent lower risk of dying after a heart attack.

Less obesity. Pet owners are less likely to be overweight or obese, according to a study from the University of Utah.

Slower rate of cognitive decline. Seniors who own pets have a slower rate of cognitive decline and better memory than seniors who don't, according to a study reported at the American Academy of Neurology's 74th Annual Meeting in 2022. The study looked at 1,369 older adults with an average age of 65. More than half owned pets (with 32 percent owning pets for five years or more) and 47 percent did not. The long-term pet owners had the slowest rate of cognitive decline, significantly outscoring all the other groups on cognitive tests.

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The Alabama Brain Study on Risk for Dementia, published in *Frontiers in Aging Neuroscience*, looked at 56 pet owners and 39 nonowners, ages 20 to 74. Pet owners had higher levels of cognition (memory and attention) and larger brain structures. All in all, the researchers estimated that the brains of the pet owners were 15 years younger than the nonowners’.

Less wear and tear from stress. Allostatic load is a biological measurement of wear and tear on the body from chronic stress. It takes into account factors like blood pressure, levels of the stress hormone cortisol, and heart rate variability. One study found that dog owners were more likely to have a lower allostatic load than nonowners.

Less anxiety. In a study published in the *International Journal of Geriatric*

Psychiatry, dog owners had less anxiety than nonowners.

Greater ability to cope with trauma. In a study of people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 84 percent who were paired with a service dog reported a significant reduction in symptoms, and 40 percent were able to decrease their medications, according to a report from Johns Hopkins Medicine.

Fewer doctor visits. Seniors who owned and regularly walked a dog

Preparing for a pet

Sixty-seven percent of American households already have one or more pets. If you’re among them, you already know many of the benefits of having an animal companion. If you’re new to pet ownership, there are several factors to consider:

Young animals can be a lot of work. Sure, puppies are adorable, but they also require a lot of work, including housetraining (they have to go outside several times at night), behavior training, frequent vet visits, and more. A slightly older dog is easier to care

for, and there are countless senior pets in shelters looking for homes. If you’re interested in a young animal, a kitten is easier to care for than a puppy.

Match the pet’s energy level and interests to your own.

Before getting a pet, consider what you’d like to do together. Are you looking for a dog to run or hike with or a lap dog? A cuddly cat or one that’s more independent? Just like you have to think of your needs (do you have time for a morning walk before work every day?), you need to consider the animal’s, too. Some animals are anxious or lonely if they’re left too long.

Further, dogs can only “hold it” for so long.

Do your homework. If you’re interested in specific breeds, research them thoroughly to understand personality traits and specific health issues that may affect how they fit in with your household.

Where do you live? A Great Dane might not be the best choice if you live in a small apartment. Consider how much indoor and outdoor space you have when choosing an animal companion.

Consider the cost. Pets can be expensive, with outlays for food, veterinary care, pet sitting, and more. Before buying a pet, carefully evaluate your budget and make sure you

can afford the additional expense, which involves timely preventive and emergency care. You can expect to spend anywhere from \$600 to \$1,800 per year on a healthy pet, and illnesses can drive that figure up quickly. (Pet insurance can help with unexpected costs.) If finances are an issue, you can experience the joy of pets without the cost by serving as a foster pet parent for a pet rescue.

Spay and neuter. You’ll also want to make sure to neuter your pet. Neutering benefits your pet’s health, lowering or eliminating the risk of reproductive cancers and improving behavior. It also reduces the number of homeless pets that end up in shelters. Nearly 1 million cats and dogs are euthanized every year.

Consider rescue pets. Animal shelters are filled with pets of all ages and breeds, and the adoption fees are often much lower than the cost of buying from a breeder. Most SPCAs include spaying and neutering and basic vaccinations in the adoption fee as well.

If you want a cat without nails, look to shelters for one that has already been declawed. A growing number of veterinarians will no longer perform this surgery as it is considered inhumane.

Are allergies a factor? Make sure that neither you nor your family members are allergic to dog or cat dander. If you are and still want a pet, talk to your doctor about allergy treatments.

Take your time. Most importantly, don’t make the decision of pet ownership impulsively. Carefully consider if you have the time, money, and energy to engage an animal companion. Pets develop strong emotional bonds with their owners, and it’s painful for them to be left at a shelter if the fit isn’t right.



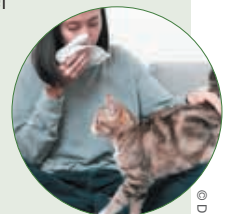
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Plan for an Emergency

Imagine this unfortunate but not uncommon scenario: Your dog is at home waiting for your return, but you're injured in a car accident and have to go to the hospital. Who is going to take care of your pet? The best way to handle this possibility is to have a friend or relative who has agreed to take care of your pet in case of an emergency. Talk to that person in advance and get their firm agreement that they'll look after your pet if and when you can't. Make sure they know all your wishes as to how you want the pet cared for—from feeding to daily exercise to grooming. And make a financial agreement as to how the pet care will be paid for.

Similarly, plan ahead for the possibility of evacuation in the event of a natural disaster. Identify where you can go with your pet, and have a go-bag ready for you both.

had fewer doctor's visits in a study from researchers at the University of Missouri.

Longer life. Dog owners had a 24 percent lower risk of death from any cause in a study published in the journal *Circulation* that looked at nearly 4 million people.

Soothing companions

Pets provide companionship and decrease loneliness with their presence and, in the case of dogs, when you go out and interact with other dog owners. A report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention showed that social isolation increases the risk of premature death from *all* causes—rivaling smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity as a risk factor. Social isolation, says the report, is also linked to a 50 percent increased risk of dementia, a 29 percent increased risk of heart disease, and a 32 percent increased risk of stroke. Similarly, loneliness is linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety.

As you interact with an animal companion—playing with a dog, stroking a cat, delighting in an aquarium—there are a wide range of positive biological responses:

- Blood pressure and heart rate fall.
- There are lower levels of cortisol, the stress hormone.
- There are higher levels of oxytocin, a feel-good hormone released during touch, warmth and stroking in trusting relationships (and also during labor, breastfeeding, and sex).

- There are higher levels of dopamine, the neurotransmitter released during pleasurable activities.

The end result is positive feelings of happiness, self-esteem, calm, and purpose. And let's not forget perhaps the greatest benefit of all: receiving the unconditional acceptance and love that people value so highly in their animal companions.

Maximizing benefits

Pets—particularly dogs and cats—communicate with their human companions in many ways. Although you don't have to become a behavioral expert to figure out your pet, it's good to have a basic knowledge of dog or cat behavior so you can understand what they're trying to "say" to you. Seeing your pet as a sentient being with its own wants and needs—and seeing yourself more as a guardian than an owner—will benefit you and your companion, ensuring your pet is happy and healthy.

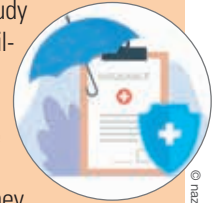
Finally, a relationship with an animal companion is a *relationship*: Take the time to develop it. Spend time with your companion every day. Take your dog for a walk; play games with your cat.

This will build a strong bond and provide the best health for you and your friend.

Bottom Line Health interviewed Carrie Nydick Finch, LCSW, a licensed clinical social worker and Deputy Director of Programs & Strategy at PAWS NY (Pets Are Wonderful Support, New York). Ms. Finch is certified in animal-assisted activities, therapy, and learning. www.pawsny.org

Investigative NEWS

Beware ghost networks. The staff of Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) conducted a "secret-shopper" study to investigate the availability of in-network mental-health providers in 12 Medicare Advantage insurance plans in six states. They called more than 100 providers that were listed as in-network in the insurer's directories to try to make an appointment for a family member with depression. The secret shoppers were able to get an appointment only 18 percent of the time. In Oregon, Sen. Wyden's home state, staff could not make one successful appointment.



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"That means more than eight in 10 mental health providers listed in these insurance company materials were inaccurate or weren't taking appointments." He noted that other studies of commercial health insurance plan had similar results.

"We've got to have more oversight, greater transparency, and serious consequences for insurance companies that are fleecing American consumers," he added.

"When insurance companies host ghost networks, they are selling health coverage under false pretenses, because the mental health providers advertised in their plan directories aren't picking up the phone or taking new patients," Wyden said. "In any other business, if a product or service doesn't meet expectations, consumers can ask for a refund. In my view, it's a breach of contract for insurance companies to sell their plans for thousands of dollars each month while their product is unusable due to a ghost network."

Traditional Medicare plans are audited to ensure that the coverage meets minimum standards, but Medicare Advantage provider directories are not regularly audited.

Sen. Wyden has pledged to pursue action to eliminate ghost networks.