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one dog at a time

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 MediaNews Group

***A guide
about
our
best
friends***

Pets

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PETS

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Patsy, a golden retriever, was part of United Paws, a United Airlines program that allows passengers to interact with comfort dogs at Washington Dulles International Airport.

MATT MCCLAIN — THE WASHINGTON POST

CARING FOR OUR FURRY FRIENDS

CARE

Looking for a well-behaved dog?

Breed may not tell you much

By Katie Shepherd
The Washington Post

Americans have as many stereotypes about dogs as there are distinct breeds: Chihuahuas are nervous; border collies are hyperactive; golden retrievers are great with children; and, most infamous, some large breeds — like the American pit bull terrier and Rottweiler — are aggressive.

But a research paper published this year by scientists studying the link between genetics and dog behavior suggests that our preconceived notions may be wrong.

Breed means very little in predicting the behavior and personality of an individual dog, the researchers found. That appears to be especially true for traits that are most commonly associated with a dog's personality, qualities such as cuddliness, friendliness toward strangers and aggression.

"What the dog looks like is not really going to tell you what the dog acts like," said Marjie Alonso, a co-author of the study and the executive director of the IAABC Foundation, the charitable arm of the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants.

The study, published in Science, looked at the genes of more than 2,000 dogs paired with 200,000 sur-

vey answers from dog owners about their pets' behaviors. The researchers examined data only on dogs that live primarily as companion animals and did not study how genes influence working dogs bred to perform specific tasks.

Breed accounted for only about 9% of behavioral variation in individual dogs and no trait was unique to a single breed of dog, the study found. The researchers speculate that much of the rest of the differences between dogs comes down to individual experiences, training and other environmental factors.

"We do think nearly all the traits are influenced by both genetics and environment," said Elinor Karlsson, a study author and a professor at the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School and the Broad Institute.

Although some traits appeared to coincide with existing beliefs about breeds, others contradicted deep-seated stereotypes. Labrador and golden retrievers, on average, scored high on "human sociability" — a measure of how receptive a dog is to unfamiliar people. That finding goes hand in hand with those breeds' reputations as friendly dogs. But American pit bull terriers, a breed that has been outlawed in some cities and is often not allowed to live in apartment complexes because of the belief that it is aggressive and destructive, also scored high on human



John Sommerville's two golden retrievers enjoy time with him in his gardens.

PHOTO BY MARY SCHWARK



ANNE RUNKLE — THE OAKLAND PRESS

Roxanne McKee of Waterford Township addresses the Board of Trustees about the problems inherent in trying to identify a dog's breed by physical characteristics, using her pet, Bullet, as an example. The board and audience incorrectly guessed Bullet was a Labrador Retriever. He is a mix of a Husky and Weimaraner.

sociability, the study found. "We knew what we were finding wasn't lining up with people's stereotypes and what they feel is their lived experience with dogs," Karlsson said.

Like breed, dog size had almost no effect on differences in behavior among individual dogs, the study found. "You will never have a Great Dane-sized Chihuahua, and you will never have a Chihuahua-sized Great Dane," Karlsson added, "but you can definitely have a Chihuahua that acts like a Great Dane, and you can

have a Great Dane with the same personality as a Chihuahua."

Some traits were more likely to be associated with certain breeds, but those largely had to do with functional behaviors such as howling, pointing, retrieving, herding and playing with toys.

On average, beagles and bloodhounds are more likely to howl. German shorthaired pointers are more likely to point. Herding breeds tended to be more biddable — or easily trained — and played

with toys more than other breeds. And, predictably, breeds classified as retrievers had a greater propensity to retrieve than other types of dogs.

Still, many individual beagles rarely howl, and some golden retrievers refuse to fetch; a dog's breed does not guarantee any specific behavior, the study found.

Traits such as howling and herding are classified as "motor patterns" in the study, and those behaviors existed in dogs long before modern breeds emerged

about 200 years ago in the Victorian era.

"Motor patterns existed before dogs did and existed in the first dogs that were scavenging off of human refuse," said Kathryn Lord, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Massachusetts Chan Medical School and another author of the study.

The first dogs to exist evolved from wolves more than 20,000 years ago and developed traits that helped them live alongside humans, where they could survive by eating people's

food scraps rather than by hunting. Humans helped promote desirable traits in the earliest dogs by feeding and caring for them, which helped useful dogs live longer and produce more puppies.

Only in the past 200 years have people begun selecting specific physical traits to produce dogs that belong to our modern breed categories.

The researchers also asked thousands of people to identify the most closely related breeds of 30 mixed-breed dogs, and they found

that people could not easily identify the breed of mutts. The respondents performed just slightly better than random chance when choosing the nearest breed of mixed-breed dogs.

The study's authors said dispelling stereotypes about our dogs may help people make better-informed choices when picking pets and also may affect breed-specific laws and policies that prevent people from owning certain dogs.

"There are some breeds that are both fairly and unfairly judged," Alonso said.

CARE

Ask a vet: Do I really need to brush my dog's teeth?

Q: Do I really need to brush my dog's teeth at home? And if so, how often?

A: In short, yes, you should be brushing its teeth daily — especially if you own a small-breed dog. If this is unmanageable, a weekly brushing paired with a daily chew-based dental product is better than no brushing at all. While you and your dog probably both dread the

task, this is more than a matter of fresh breath and sparkling teeth.

Regular oral care can prevent serious infections of the mouth that can cause pain and prevent dogs from eating —

and decrease the need for costly veterinary procedures that require anesthesia. And yes, it can help with that breath thing, too. Here's what you need to know about dental disease in dogs, and how to make brushing more palatable for both of you.

What's up with doggy breath, anyway?

Anyone who's been close to a panting dog knows about "dog breath." Sometimes it's because of something a dog just ate, such as a few prime litter fritters from a cat's litter box (a popular menu item for my black Labrador, Bodhi).

But more often, a dog's bad breath results from periodontal disease — disease of the gums and structures that stabilize the teeth — which affects at least 80 percent of dogs over 3 years old.

Under the right conditions, certain bacteria that are normally found in a dog's mouth can accumulate. These bacteria degrade protein in entrapped food, generating a mixture of foul-smelling substances, including sulfur compounds and "death odor" molecules like putrescine and cadaverine.

But overgrowth of these bac-

teria can have worse consequences than bad breath, especially in dogs that are predisposed to periodontal disease because of older age, diet, diseases like diabetes, and breed.

What do I need to know about gum disease in dogs?

To defend itself, the body sends fighter cells to the gum tissues. This cellular invasion leads to redness and thickening of the gums (gingivitis), creating pockets around teeth that — paradoxically — trap billions of bacteria in the form of plaque. The conditions also favor proliferation of "bad" bacteria, which exacerbates the inflammatory response, creating a vicious cycle that can cause foul breath, tooth loss and pain.

A dog with bad periodontal disease may paw at its face, become less interactive, stop eating, or drop food from its mouth. In some cases, debris and dead bacteria accumulate as pus around a tooth root. When a large collection of pus (known as an abscess) forms, it can burst into the nasal cavity, so that "snot" drains from a nostril. Abscesses of the upper molars can distort a dog's eyeball, affecting its vision. According to Maria Soltero-Rivera, a specialist in veterinary dentistry at the University of California at Da-

vis, severe periodontal disease in small dogs can weaken the lower jaw so much that the jaw breaks with minor impact, such as jumping off a couch.

Like in humans, studies in dogs also suggest a possible link between periodontal disease and disease in important organs including the heart and kidneys. However, proving a direct cause has been difficult, as older dogs often have both periodontal disease and organ problems.

Does daily brushing work?

All of this sounds extreme and alarming, but the good news is, you can prevent a lot of it by properly brushing your dog's teeth daily. The World Small Animal Veterinary Association Global Dental Guidelines say that the best way to treat periodontal disease in dogs is through scaling and polishing by a veterinarian (deep cleaning below the gum line to remove tartar and plaque), followed by daily at-home tooth brushing. The deep cleaning requires general anesthesia.

But despite the proven effectiveness of daily brushing, a Swedish survey of nearly 60,000 dog owners found that only one in five owners who were instructed by their veterinarian to brush daily actually did so, even though they believed their dog's dental health was poor. The

main reason given: Fido simply refused to cooperate. Soltero-Rivera adds that "owners who ultimately succeed generally say that it takes them (and their dogs) about 3-4 months to build a habit."

Do some breeds of dogs benefit more from brushing?

Small-breed dogs are particularly prone to periodontal disease, because of feeding regimens, overcrowding of teeth, the shape of the head, or other genetic factors. In one of the largest health care studies conducted in dogs (2.8 million U.S. dogs), Yorkies, toy poodles and dachshunds had the highest chance of periodontal disease. Small dogs also had professional cleanings under general anesthesia more often than large-breed dogs. Small breeds have the longest lifespans, and anesthesia is riskier for older dogs. Unfortunately (and primarily for genetic reasons), these same small-breed dogs are typically the least cooperative when it comes to tooth brushing — including one of Soltero-Rivera's own chihuahuas, Princess Olivia.

How do I brush my dog's teeth?

Proper brushing means targeting the outside surfaces of the gum line; brushing the teeth themselves does little to address periodontal disease. Although pet toothbrushes — including electric versions — are available, soft human toothbrushes work fine. Dog toothpaste is not necessary, but the flavors are designed to appeal to dogs, so using your finger or some gauze to spread a pea-size amount on the teeth before brushing can act as a reward. Gradually increase the amount of time you spend brushing as tolerated over 2 to 4 months. See the webpage of the UC-Davis Dentistry and Oral Surgery Service for a fun

instructional video (and one for cats!).

Are there alternatives for owners who can't brush their dog's teeth?

The good news is that the burgeoning pet ownership trend has generated a vast array of dental home care products. Companies have found all sorts of creative ways to deliver these products into a dog's mouth — including diets, chews, water additives and antibacterial gels. When used daily, some products can reduce periodontal disease and bad breath. Soltero-Rivera recommends chew-based products that you can indent with your nail (hard chews can break teeth).

Nevertheless, proper daily tooth brushing remains about three times more effective than a dental chew or dental diet. Combining weekly brushing with daily use of chew-based products may be better than no brushing, reducing the need for potentially risky and costly anesthetic procedures. (A scale-and-polish treatment in the U.S. can cost owners more than \$1,000 if extractions are required. Although anesthesia is essential, most dogs do not need antibiotics, which add expense and can cause vomiting, diarrhea and antibiotic resistance).

Perplexed by the plethora of home care products? The Veterinary Oral Health Council, which includes several board-certified veterinary dental specialists, approves products using an evidence-based approach and lists them on their website. Your veterinarian can also provide personalized recommendations based on your dog's risk factors and temperament, and your lifestyle and budget.

Jane Sykes is a professor of veterinary medicine at the University of California-Davis. She is a board-certified specialist in small animal (dog and cat) internal medicine with a special interest in infectious diseases.

PHOTO COURTESY
OF METRO EDITORIAL
SERVICES



Jane Sykes

CARE

Replace your dog or cat's water bowl with a pet water fountain

By BestReviews

Cats love a running faucet, and dogs are famous for running toward a garden hose in hopes of a fresh drink. Clearly, our furry pals love fresh, running water. If you have a much-loved dog or cat in your home, you may want to consider upgrading their regular water bowl to a pet water fountain to help them stay hydrated and healthy.

A pet water fountain may actually get your dog or cat to drink more water. The devices have become more popular in recent years, and for good reason. There are many benefits to providing one for your pets.

PET WATER FOUNTAIN HEALTH BENEFITS

They're cleaner

Even if you change out the water in your pet's bowl a few times a day, it can still be full of bacteria. A pet water fountain can be cleaner because many of the ones on the market actually filter the water as it's coming out. This prevents bacteria from growing and keeps your pup or kitty healthier.

More hydration for reluctant pets

Another benefit is better hydration for pets that are typically reluctant to drink from a regular bowl. A pet water fountain may encourage your dog or cat to drink water more often. Cats are wired to look for freshly flowing water instead of still water in a stagnant source. Better hydration can help improve health outcomes and even prevent certain illnesses in your animals such as kidney issues, diabetes and urinary tract infections.

Helps pets stay hydrated while you travel

The water fountain continuously provides fresh water, so with cats in particular, it can be a lifesaver if you're traveling and



CATIT/ORSDA/PETSAFE/BESTREVIEWS ILLUSTRATION

want them to have access to water the whole time you're gone.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING A PET WATER FOUNTAIN

How to clean it

Pet water fountains need to be kept clean in order to keep your pets healthy, and some are easier to clean than others. Try to purchase a pet water fountain that is fairly easy to clean and not difficult to disassemble and reassemble.

Size

Consider the number and size of your pets before deciding on the size of fountain to buy. A larger fountain is excellent for multiple animals, but if you only have one smaller animal, it wouldn't make sense. They also take up a good deal of space, so be sure to pick one that will fit where you need it to go.

Noise level

Pet fountains are never completely silent, but some are louder than others. Check reviews to see if the pet fountain you like has a loud motor or makes loud water sounds.

Material

Plastic pet water fountains will likely cost a bit less, but ceramic or stainless steel should last longer and could be easier to clean. Take this into consideration when making your decision.

BEST PET WATER FOUNTAINS

Oneisall Dog Water Fountain

If you have a larger pup or multiple dogs, this pet water fountain could be the right fit. Its 7-liter capacity means plenty of water for your dogs, and it's made of 304 stainless steel, making it dishwasher-safe and easy to clean. It

also features a triple filtration system to ensure your dog's water is always fresh.

NautyPaws Ceramic Cat Water Fountain

If you're looking for a cat water fountain that packs aesthetic appeal, this is a perfect option. It's ceramic and comes in multiple colors to vibe with your existing decor. The ceramic material means it's resistant to scratches, and it runs quietly thanks to its advanced pump.

PetSafe Drinkwell Platinum Dog and Cat Water Fountain

This large pet fountain is great for bigger dogs as it has a built-in reservoir that holds 168 ounces of water. This fountain features a replaceable carbon filter so your pet's water is always clean and fresh. All parts are top-rack dishwasher-safe, so it's easy to keep clean, as well.

Loomla Cat Water Fountain

This pet water fountain features a quiet pump, an 85-ounce capacity and an LED light with a switch for nighttime. It's made of BPA-free plastic and boasts an affordable price. It also has triple filtration for the cleanest water and a window to show you how much water is left before it needs a refill.

PetSafe Drinkwell Ceramic Pet Water Fountain

This water fountain would work well for cats and smaller dogs thanks to its 70-ounce capacity. It's ceramic, so it's top-shelf dishwasher-safe and looks more attractive than plastic or stainless steel. It has a submersible pump, so it operates quietly.

BestReviews spends thousands of hours researching, analyzing and testing products to recommend the best picks for most consumers.

CARE

A watchful eye: Use tech to track your pet

By Kelvin Chan
The Associated Press

“Have you seen the cats?”

That’s a common refrain in my household because our two felines, Maple and Juniper, can venture outside through a flap in the backdoor. Like many other house cats, they’re free to come and go, roaming the surrounding backyards and beyond, equipped with microchips to identify them if they get lost.

If your cat likes to prowl outdoors for long stretches, or your dog has a tendency to run off, it can be distressing when they don’t return as expected.

If you’re worried about your furry friend’s whereabouts, technology can help you keep tabs on them.

How pet tech works

Dedicated pet trackers are collar-worn devices that typically use GPS signals to pinpoint the location of the animal wearing them. They use a 4G cellphone signal or your home Wi-Fi connection to relay the position to a smartphone app.

There are many products on the market. Tractive, Jibbit and Pawfit are among brands that offer trackers for both dogs and cats. Devices for the latter are generally smaller and lighter.

Dog trackers with integrated collars are available from Fi and Whistle. PetTracer is a cat collar that uses both GPS and radio signals from a home base station. FitBark, also for dogs, has an Apple Watch app to monitor location and other activity.

Garmin has a range of GPS dog collars that work with handheld devices resembling walkie-talkies, but they’re pricey and aimed at outdoors enthusiasts like hunters.

Phone signals

Most trackers let you designate a safe zone on a map, usually your house and surrounding area, and alert you if your pet has left it.

They usually operate on the 4G LTE spectrum commonly used by wireless carriers. It typically has

the longest range of any cellular signal, said Andrew Bleiman, Tractive’s executive vice president for North America.

That means strong connectivity in most of Europe and North America “unless you’re in a really far flung place like the middle of a national park,” Bleiman said.

What it costs

Exact price depends on brand and model. Most devices sell for less than \$100. However, keep in mind you’ll also have to pay a subscription fee for the cell service to function.

While that could cost \$100 or more a year, for some pet owners it’s worth the “peace of mind,” Bleiman said.

Battery life

The collars usually have a built-in rechargeable battery but battery life varies. Most will be last at least two to three days before they need charging, and a lot longer in ideal conditions.

One big factor is signal strength. The battery will drain faster if the device has to work harder to pick up the GPS or connect to Wi-Fi. Some save power by not sending coordinates in the safe zone.

Other features

Like fitness watches for humans, pet tracking apps offer health and activity monitoring features. You can see how long your cat or dog has spent resting or exercising on a daily or hourly basis.

But be aware, a tracker is “not going to keep your pet in the backyard,” Bleiman said. It will only “alert you when they leave the virtual fence area that you set up.”

How to use it

This One Tech Tip was inspired by Maple, who once went AWOL for days. It turned out he was hanging out in a backyard 10 doors down the street. We only found out after the residents got hold of a pet microchip scanner to look up our contact details to let us know so we could retrieve him.

Tractive provided a loaner device to try. Using the included



KELVIN CHAN — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

An Apple Air Tag and a Chipolo Bluetooth tracker are seen on a keyring next to a cat on Thursday, May 29.



KELVIN CHAN — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A Chipolo Bluetooth tracker is displayed while a cat rests in the background on Thursday, May 29.

breakaway collar, we put it on Maple, who clearly didn't like it at first. He dashed out the back door and jumped through a hole in the fence.

Over the next day, I used the Tractive app to monitor his movements. It showed his travels back and forth onto various neighboring properties. He came back to rest for a few hours around midnight, went out to prowls again around 3 a.m., then came back after an hour to nap some more.

It was fascinating to see where he was spending his time. According to the app's "heatmap," one of Maple's favorite spots was the same backyard where we had to retrieve him previously.

Losing track

About 24 hours after I attached the Tractive collar on Maple, I noticed he was no longer wearing it. It had somehow come off.

If you can't find your pet's exact location, or the device gets lost, Tractive has a "radar" feature to pinpoint it with your phone's Bluetooth. Other brands have similar features.

On the app's map, I could see it was in a nearby backyard and that I was getting closer because the circle was getting bigger. But I couldn't figure out where it was and, not wanting to disturb the neighbors, I gave up.

Bleiman recommends using a harness for cats that don't like collars, but I'm not convinced.

Microchips

It's common for cats and dogs to be implanted with microchips, with the details added to a database. That makes it much easier to reunite owners with lost dogs and cats, even if they've strayed hundreds of miles away or gone missing for years.

Pet microchips, about the size of a grain of

rice implanted just below the skin, are legally required in some European countries. There's no federal law in the U.S., though some places like Hawaii now require them, so check with state or local authorities.

But there's some confusion about what microchips can do. Because they don't have a power supply, they can't be tracked in real time. Whoever finds your pet would need to take it to a vet or a shelter to scan the device for contact details.

Air Tags and similar devices are another option

Many pet owners use Bluetooth trackers like Apple's Air Tags, Samsung's SmartTags or similar devices from Tile, Cube and Chipolo, which rely on low-power signals relayed by passing smartphones.

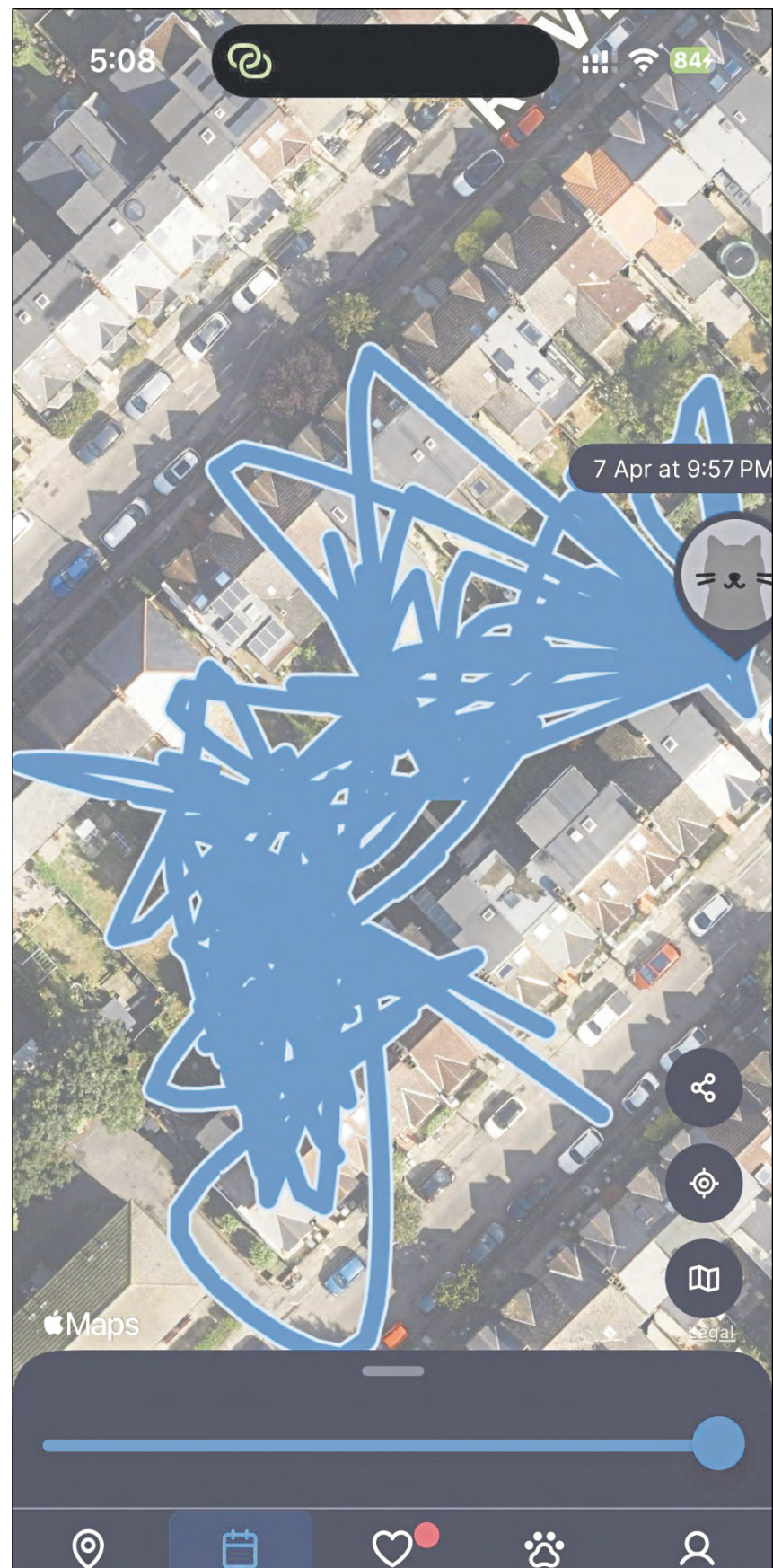
Bluetooth trackers have a range of 100 to 500 feet, depending on the model. The batteries last for months if not longer, and there's no need to pay for a subscription.

However, they're not specifically marketed for pets. That hasn't stopped pet owners, judging from many recommendations they've posted in online forums.

Chipolo advises that its round plastic trackers are only for "in-house pets like house-trained cats and smaller dogs" and warns against using them on "larger dog breeds and outdoor cats."

Still, they can be a solution for some pet owners.

"Bluetooth is a totally reasonable solution if you're in a downtown urban core," Bleiman said. "But pets move fast. And if you're in a wooded park, or you're in a suburban area — let alone a more rural or wilderness area — it's pretty unlikely your pet is going to be close to a Bluetooth device."



KELVIN CHAN — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A screenshot of the Tractive pet tracking app shows the path that a cat has taken on Thursday, May 29.

CARE



OSCILLOSCOPE LABORATORIES VIA AP

This image released by Oscilloscope Laboratories shows promotional art for Cat Video Fest 2025.

“Cats are stalk and rush animals, meaning they prefer an element of surprise,” explains Delgado. Hunting blinds are designed to give cats the opportunity to stay hidden while still seeing their surroundings. Don’t worry about purchasing special materials — hunting blinds can be as simple as a cardboard box or a towel draped over a dining chair.

There’s a better way to play with your cat

By Sam Sanders

Special to The Washington Post

Cats might enjoy a reputation as being more “low maintenance” than some pets, but just because your cat isn’t running up to you with a ball in his mouth, begging for a game of fetch, doesn’t mean he doesn’t need play. Play is critical for a cat’s health and happiness and allows cats to tap into their predator instincts (yes, your sweet, cuddly kitty has them).

Giving cats a space to practice hunting through play can reduce psychological stress, encourage exercise and help ce-

ment healthier habits.

Playing with cats isn’t necessarily as intuitive as playing with other animals.

Here are some ways to improve play time with your feline friend:

Pick the right toys

“Cats don’t really care about color at all,” says Sarah Ellis, the cat well-being and behavioral lead at the International Cat Care Charity and co-author of “The Trainable Cat.” Cats see colors on a blue-violet and yellow-green spectrum, so colors like red appear gray. Many of its natural prey, like mice and insects, are gray or black. For

toys, Ellis says, “the texture and shape are what truly matter.”

Does the toy feel furry like a mouse? Does it have feathers like a bird? These are good signs that your cat will enjoy the toy. Cats slice with their teeth instead of chewing, so hard, durable toys used for dogs typically don’t work for cats. Cats also prefer toys that are smaller in size, similar to the size of the prey they hunt.

And forget about laser pointers. Despite their popularity, laser pointers are generally not recommended — for cats, a laser is uncatchable prey and a source of frustration.

Move your cat’s toy in a pattern that mimics their prey

“Play provides an opportunity to practice life skills in a safer environment,” says Mikel Delgado, author of “Play With Your Cat!” Moving toys to simulate prey running away will excite your cat.

To mimic a bird, glide a wand toy in large sweeping movements or figure eights mirroring natural flight patterns. Create “S-shaped” wiggles on the floor with a wand to mimic a worm or snake.

Tuck a toy under your rug like a hiding mouse.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SAVED BY ZADE

Mozzie is one of the many cats to come through Saved by Zade in 2024.

Let your cat win

As you move their toy in prey-like motions, periodically let your cat “win” by capturing the toy, and don’t immediately rip it away. This allows them to finish the predator cycle. Let them celebrate their successful hunt with additional kicks, bats and bites before reengaging for additional playtime.

Create multisensory experiences through sound

Adding sound brings dimension to a cat play session. “Cats can hear in an ultrasonic range,” Delgado said. “Their close-up vision is very fuzzy, with a focal point of only a few meters away, so they use their hearing to know if prey is nearby.”

Create noises that mimic what cats would hear in the wild, like a high-frequency chirp or squeak. The rustling sound of paper, tissue paper or cardboard while playing with a toy can mimic the sound of rustling through leaves. Try hiding treats in the paper pile, creating an immersive food puzzle.

Set the scene with hiding spots for an exciting play space

“Cats are stalk and rush animals, meaning they prefer an element of surprise,” explains Delgado. Hunting blinds are designed to give cats the opportunity to stay hidden while still seeing their surroundings. Don’t worry about purchasing special materials — hunting blinds can be as simple as a cardboard box or a towel draped over a dining chair. You can also use a hunting blind to hide a toy while playing, similar to how prey might hide in the wild.

Create novelty by rotating toys

Cats can get bored with their toys. Rather than purchasing a new one, try putting away tired toys after playing, out of sight from your cat, and then reintroducing them later. Delgado recommends bringing out a few toys each play session and then rotating to a different set of toys for the following play session. When introducing a brand-new toy, give it some time. Delgado notes that some cats can take five to 10 play sessions before they get used to a brand-new toy.

Try turning the lights down low

Cats need play throughout the day, but engaging in a play session during low-light conditions is another opportunity to provide a novel and enriching play session. “Cats are crepuscular, meaning they are most active at dawn and dusk,” says Delgado. As dawn and dusk change throughout the seasons, your cat’s play habits will change, too. Take this as an opportunity to give your cat a high-intensity play session as the sun is setting to help them (and you!) get a restful night of sleep.

Modify your play based on the age of your cat

When kittens are born, they are easily excited and played with, but as cats get older, play can look a little different. This doesn’t mean you stop playing with your cat. “Healthy cats will always play regardless of their age,” explains Ellis.

As cats age, you should opt to play on softer surfaces like beds or rugs. You can use gym mats to prevent slipping or low stools to add verticality while keeping play

lower to the ground. You may not find your cat leaping across the room as they age, but even engaging and batting a toy while lying down can provide your older cat the stimulation they need.

Make time to learn your cat’s unique play preferences

All the tips in the world won’t compensate for an owner taking the time to play with their cat dynamically. Both Delgado and Ellis stress that making play a habit, like cleaning the litter box and providing food and water, is critical for their health. They recommend short play sessions after an activity you already do daily, like brushing your teeth or doing the dishes. Ellis suggests, “five-minute play sessions three or four times a day would be perfect.”

By consistently playing with your cat, you will learn her preferences — trial and error is an integral part of the learning process. “Playing with your cat is not like baking a cake with the same recipe each time,” says Delgado. “It is a dance, an ebb and flow. Try new moves and see how they respond.”

CARE

What to know before you buy a dog ball

By Bestreviews

Some dogs will happily play fetch all day if you play ball, while others prefer to keep sessions short and sweet. Whichever category your canine companion falls into, choosing the right dog ball is crucial.

You need a ball that's durable enough to stand up to regular use and is of the right size for your dog. Plus, a good dog ball should be easy to throw and comfortable to catch.

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE YOU BUY A DOG BALL

Size

You must choose a dog ball of an appropriate size for your canine companion. If a ball is too large for your dog, they won't be able to pick it up comfortably, if at all. On the other hand, if a ball is too small for your dog, it could pose a choking hazard. Many dog toy manufacturers offer balls in two or three sizes, but since there's no standard sizing for dog balls, it's best to check the dimensions to be sure.

Durability

Some balls for dogs are highly durable, while others aren't any tougher than a standard tennis ball. If your dog is prone to running off with their ball and chewing it, you'll need a heavy-duty option, especially if they're a large dog or a particularly determined chewer. Even if your dog doesn't chew up their balls, too flimsy a ball won't stand up to regular use, so choose a durable option if you play fetch with your dog most days.

Squeaker

You can find some dog balls with squeakers inside and some without squeakers. Whether or not you want a squeaker depends on you and your dog. Many dogs love playing with squeaky toys, which is excellent for them, but



PHOTO BY MIGUEL MEDINA/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

A dog wears a pair of sunglasses as he takes a walk with a toy in his mouth.

some love it a bit too much and will make it their mission to destroy any toy that squeaks at them. Conversely, you'll find a minority of dogs who get put off by toys with squeakers in and won't play with them. From a dog owner's perspective, squeaky balls can get annoying if your dog spends hours a day squeaking them.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A QUALITY DOG BALL

Texture

You can find dog balls with a textured finish, as well as standard smooth balls. Some dogs find textured balls easy to hold onto, plus they offer a better grip for the person holding the ball,

especially once it becomes slick with dog slobber. What's more, certain textured balls massage the gumline when dogs chew in them, which can improve overall dental health.

Bounce

A dog ball with a nice amount of bounce to it is even more fun for dogs to chase. Dogs will predict a regular bounce and learn precisely where the ball will bounce over time, but you can find some irregular-shaped balls with erratic bounces to keep dogs guessing.

Ball launcher compatibility

If you want to use your dog's ball in a ball launcher, make sure it's compatible with a ball

launcher and of the right size to fit yours.

How much you can expect to spend on a dog ball

Dog balls are relatively affordable. Basic options cost around \$2-\$5, while more durable or feature-rich options cost around \$5-\$10.

Dog ball FAQ

Q: Why do dogs like balls so much?

A: Our dogs might be our loving furry family members, but let's not forget that they're descended from wolves and used by humans as hunting partners for thousands of years after that.

Although their dinner comes out of a can today, dogs still have an innate desire to chase and catch moving prey. Chasing balls helps fulfill this desire. Even though dogs don't think that balls are prey, they still feel the urge to chase them and grab them.

Q: What other toys can I buy for my dog?

A: You can buy a huge range of other toys for your dog, including chew, plush, tug and interactive toys. When choosing toys for your dog, consider their personality and what they generally like doing. For example, an intelligent, treat-motivated dog might enjoy a puzzle toy where treats are the reward.



TAKING A FEATURED ROLE IN THE FAMILY

FEATURE

This man rates dogs for a living

He has millions of loyal followers

By Sydney Page

Special to The Washington Post

It started as a series of jokes. Matt Nelson began posting one-liners on X, formerly Twitter, in 2015 to test his comedic chops.

"I noticed that all of my jokes that had to do with dogs just did way better than my other jokes," said Nelson, then a college freshman at Campbell University in Buies Creek, North Carolina.

That sparked an idea.

"If the entire internet loves dogs, and so do I, and I have a knack for writing humorously about them, then I should start a new account," said Nelson, who grew up in Charleston, West Virginia.

He decided to post a poll on his personal X account, asking his small following if he should create a dog-rating account. At the time, X had a 140-character limit on posts, so Nelson thought numerical ratings were a way to keep things concise.

The poll results were unanimous, and WeRateDogs was born. He added the tagline: "Your only source for professional dog ratings."

The first post, on Nov. 15, 2015, was of a friend's dog.

"Here we have a Japanese Irish Setter. Lost eye in Vietnam (?). Big fan of relaxing on stair. 8/10 would pet," Nelson wrote in an X post, along with a photo of the dog.

"After that first post, we had 100 messages from people wanting their own dog rated," Nelson said. "It was a nonstop torrent of potential content."

Within one week of the first post, WeRateDogs had 100,000 followers on X.

Nelson quickly realized that his comedic experiment had a lot of potential. But he had no idea that nearly a decade later, WeRateDogs would con-

tinue to have a huge, fiercely loyal following on social media, including 9 million followers on X, 4.4 million on Instagram, 2.8 million on TikTok and 1.2 million on Facebook. His videos regularly get millions of views, with some of them clocking in at tens of millions, and thousands of enthusiastic comments.

It's also a profitable business with a 501(c)(3) nonprofit arm.

When he first started, Nelson decided to go all-in to figure out if he could make it big. He made the tough choice to drop out of college — where he was studying professional golf management — in 2017 to dedicate all his time to WeRateDogs.

"Once I realized that I had this passion for it and I was having so much fun, nothing I was doing in school was assisting me with that," said Nelson, who now lives in Los Angeles.

Although his account is lighthearted and funny, Nelson said, running a dog-rating business is no joke.

Initially, he managed everything himself for several months, sifting through thousands of daily dog submissions he was getting through direct messages from fans. He'd select which ones to post and think up a witty caption and rating for each pup.

"In the beginning, it was staggering," Nelson said. "It was probably close to 5,000 to 6,000 submissions a day."

Choosing the dogs to feature, he said, felt like an impossible task. So many of them beckoned to be rated. Nelson prioritized the funniest or highest-quality photos.

"Every dog is the best and every dog is the cutest," Nelson said.

His profile photo hasn't changed since he started the account. It's of a dog named Pippin with striking blue eyes and an intense expression, which



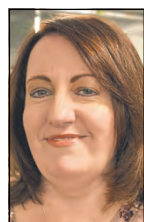
JONATHAN NA

FEATURE

Healing my heart — one dog at a time

"The dogs were good again this week!"

Those are the seven words I most look forward to hearing every Friday. For the past few years, Matt Nelson and his "We



Andrea Blum

Rate Dogs" account on social media have brightened my days — bringing laughter and happiness at a time when I needed it most. His Friday videos highlight the top five weekly stories of dogs doing funny or quirky things or showing the loyalty, bravery and heroism for which they are so loved.

I've always been a dog lover. I grew up with dogs and know firsthand how life takes on a whole new meaning when you come home to a wagging tail, wet nose and eyes full of unconditional love each day.

First, there was Ginger. My parents brought the calm, loving dog with chocolate brown eyes and a lush, fan-like tail home when I was just 8 years old. We grew up together and she was part of our family day in and day out for years. I was in college when we had to say goodbye, and it was the first true heartbreak of my life. She'd been with me through my formative years and beyond but, at 17 years old, she let us know when it was time to let her go.

A few years later, along came Toby to fill the void in our lives. The feisty little Shih-tzu was adorable beyond words and full of personality. He was our

source of love, companionship and entertainment for 12 years until yet another unbearable heartbreak.

Lastly, there was Freddie — a little, black, wire-haired rescue dog afraid of his own shadow. I don't know what he'd been through before he came to us, but he never fully got over that anxious, worried nature — even after years in a home with love, food, the best of care and all the belly rubs he could ask for.

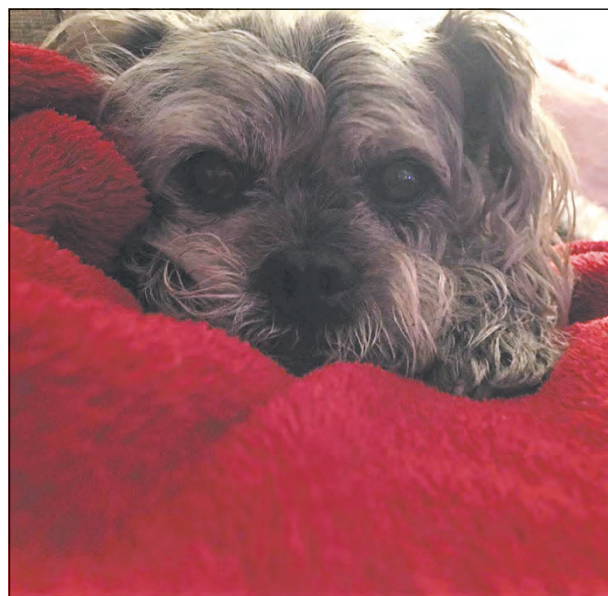
When you lose a beloved dog, the grief hits unbelievably hard. Just as hard as when you lose a special person in your life. Because dogs are family. They are our furry companions through all of life's ups and downs, a

calm and steady source of unwavering support. A dog never lets you down, a dog is never cruel or unkind, a dog never hurts your feelings — until you have to tell them goodbye.

I often lamented and wondered why dogs couldn't live as long as people do. But one day I realized it's because they don't have to.

They've already got it all figured out. They know how to love without limits, how to live in the moment and how to show their love, loyalty, devotion and appreciation without reservation.

Freddie's death seems to have affected me the most, although I'm not quite sure why. Maybe it's because the months before losing him were so traumatic as he developed diabetes, then lost his sight and hearing. Or maybe because I'm older now — more cognizant of my own mortality — and more aware of the need for love in our lives.



Freddie

It's nearly two years later and I'm still having a hard time dealing with life without Freddie. I still think I hear him trotting down the hall to come to my room or sniffing at the door when I come home.

When I stumbled on Matt and his "We Rate Dogs" account, I was deep in that despair. Little did I know that the sweet photos and silly captions of dogs around the world would help me navigate the grief of losing Freddie — and all my dogs — by reaffirming just why they are so beloved. Seeing their stories of adventures, funny quirks and heroic tales is a source of joy and laughter each day. It heals my heart one little patch at a time.

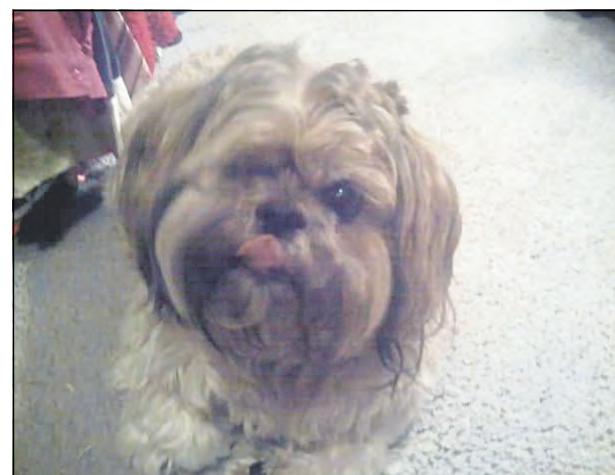
Life is strange and so different now without a dog. This is the longest stretch of time I've been without one in my life, and right now I'm not sure if another one is in my future.

But I crave that love

and attention that comes with a dog. I seek them out when I'm at the park, at the store or just walking around the neighborhood. Seeing Buddy the therapy dog at my work every Tuesday is a highlight of my week. I look for any opportunity I can find to connect with dogs.

So when a "tell your dog i said hi" sticker popped up in the "We Rate Dogs" online store, I eagerly bought one and slapped it on my car. Since then, I've noticed other vehicles sporting the same sticker, including my next-door neighbor's cars. I'm still waiting for a driver to pull up next to me, roll down their window and inform me that they will tell their dog I said hi — but I hope that's coming soon.

The sticker and its message have become somewhat of a movement. Occasionally, videos show up on Matt's site of people seeing the stickers on vehicles and returning home to film their dog's reac-



Toby



Ginger

tions when they tell them "hi" from the strangers. Those videos are always among my favorites. Dog people just have that special type of connection.

And the best thing about supporting "We Rate Dogs" with its "tell

your dog i said hi" merchandise is that proceeds benefit sick and needy dogs through its nonprofit 15/10 Foundation. It's gratifying to know that, in some small way, you're helping to heal dogs that heal our hearts every day.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ANDREA BLUM

Rating

FROM PAGE 14

he picked because he wanted the account to have a playfully absurd feel.

"It felt very formal, and that was contrasted with the ridiculous posts I was making," Nelson said.

Nelson initially found the photo of Pippin online, but as the account grew, Pippin's owners eventually got in touch with him and they became friendly.

At first, all dogs were rated fairly high (aside from noncanine animals, which were given low ratings), but they were never rated above 9/10. Then one day, Nelson decided to give one dog a 10/10 rating, and people went wild.

Another day, he gave a dog 11/10.

"That was a eureka moment," Nelson said.

He adjusted his rating scale so the lowest was 10/10 and the highest was 15/10. Recently, the lowest score has been 12/10. Nelson said his rating process is arbitrary, unless the pup is a true "hero dog" worthy of the coveted 15/10 rating. His generous ratings have become a key part of the WeRateDogs identity.

"When we hit a million followers, I was like, 'People are paying attention to this in a way that I never would have imagined,'" Nelson said. "I didn't go into it thinking anything could be accomplished besides a few laughs."

As the account exploded in popularity, it became too much for Nelson to manage on his own. He brought on someone to help him sort through submissions, though he remained the sole writer for the first five years. He became known for his deadpan wisecracks.

In a 2016 X post, WeRateDogs featured a dog named Duke, sitting in a fridge.

"This is Duke. He sneaks into the fridge sometimes. It's his safe place. 11/10 would give little jacket if necessary," Nelson wrote.

Nelson said he focuses on dogs because he doesn't have a strong opinion about cats, and because he has never had a cat.

"I just know that I wouldn't be able to make a WeRateCats," he said. "I wouldn't do it justice."

As the account started to get even more popular, dog owners began sharing more information about their pups along with their submissions, including poignant backstories. Although most of the posts remained silly, a few became more serious.

"This is Jacob. In June of 2016, he comforted those affected by the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando. Four months ago he flew to Vegas to help families of 59 people grieve. Today, he is in Parkland, Florida hugging students who lost classmates yesterday. He is our third 15/10," WeRateDogs posted in 2018.



Matt Nelson lying on the floor with Zoey, a golden retriever puppy, in 2013.
COURTESY OF MATT NELSON

In addition to funny dog photos, followers were often sending WeRateDogs fundraising pages for pups in need, usually to cover unexpected medical bills. In 2017, Nelson started featuring a fundraiser every Friday, which quickly grew to three every Friday to keep up with demand.

The posts, which feature GoFundMe accounts, raised close to \$3 million in four years, Nelson said.

"We just knew there was something more there," he said. "All of this sent us in the direction of a foundation."

In 2021, Nelson and his team launched a nonprofit group called the 15/10 Foundation with a mission to sponsor dogs with medical needs and improve their chances of adoption.

"We have 45 rescue partners across the U.S., and we've sponsored almost 900 dogs. Their average medical cost is just under

\$5,000," Nelson said. "Once it felt like people were invested in the account and it meant a lot to them, we could turn it into a real force for good."

Nelson's own dog, Doug, whom he called WeRateDogs' chief executive, died in 2023. Nelson and his girlfriend regularly foster dogs, and said they hope to adopt another one soon.

"It's like an interview process for our next CEO," Nelson said.

WeRateDogs now has a team of about 50 people who help run the nonprofit group and the business, which makes money mostly through brand partnerships and by selling merchandise and calendars. Nelson said 15% of net proceeds from merchandise sales go to the foundation. Popular items include stickers and T-shirts that say "tell your dog i said hi."

"It's really wonderful to be at the helm of

this community," Nelson said. "It's just such a kind, empathetic, optimistic community, and I really take a lot of pride in protecting and nurturing that."

Beyond its signature humorous dog ratings, WeRateDogs publishes a "Top 5 Dogs of the Week," video, and it recently launched a weekly podcast called "The Dogs Were Good (again)."

Since the dogs continue to be good, and the public seems to have an insatiable desire to know the dogs' official ratings, Nelson does not have plans to slow down.

"There are just so many dogs to talk about, and I could talk about them forever," Nelson said.

While WeRateDogs has grown into something Nelson never thought possible, he said his primary goal has never changed — to bring people joy.

"It's all rooted in that," Nelson said.

FEATURE

Should you let pets sleep next to you?

Does it even matter what the experts say?

By Albert Stumm

The Associated Press

It turns out, our furry best friend might be our sleep enemy.

Lots of pet owners let their animals sleep on the bed with them, which usually disrupts sleep. But many would say it's worth it.

And researchers don't necessarily disagree.

Melissa Milanak, a professor at Medical University of South Carolina specializing in sleep health, said most people at her clinic say their pets disturb them often at night.

"You can't say that hands down, it's bad for every single person, but there is a lot out there saying it negatively impacts your sleep," she said.

Generally speaking, having a pet is good for many people's health. Pets have been shown to lower their humans' stress levels, get them to exercise and more. Many pet owners also say they feel an immeasurable amount of comfort by having their pets close as they sleep.

But dogs' and cats' natural sleep cycles aren't the same as those of humans.

Dogs tend to be light sleepers and wake up multiple times at night. Some display instinctual behavior like scratching at bedding, which can prevent deeper phases of sleep even if it doesn't wake you up.

As many cat owners know, "the zoomies" often happen before they are ready to get out of bed. Cats evolved to hunt in low light, meaning they are particularly active at dusk and dawn.

Milanak also said allergens such as pet dander and microbes brought into the house can affect owners' breathing, preventing them from getting enough deep sleep.

Brian Chin, a professor of social and health psychology at Trinity College in Connecticut, said his research has found that sleeping with pets was associated with poorer sleep, "particularly those dimensions of sleep quality and insomnia symptoms."



LLOYD GREEN VIA AP

Thomas, a golden retriever mix, lies on a bed.

That's even accounting for the fact that pet owners may be less inclined to report problems in a survey because they don't believe their beloved pets cause problems.

"I hate to even admit that my cat disrupts my sleep at all," said Chin, who has one cat that keeps him awake and another that leaves him alone.

Moreover, a higher number of pets was associated with higher sleep disruption, he said.

What should you do about it?

It's not as simple as telling pet owners that they shouldn't share the bed, Milanak said. For a lot of people, it becomes part of their sleep routine, which makes it difficult to sleep without it because they have come to associate pets with sleep.

Because the topic is sensitive, Milanak asks new patients several questions before getting to whether they sleep with a pet. If they're waking up multiple times a night, for example, they may not realize why. Once the association is made, she then asks whether they are open to not sleeping together.

"It's like if I said to somebody, you need to stop smoking," she said. "They're going to give me all the reasons why they want to continue smoking."

The first, most obvious solution is putting a dog bed on the floor in the bedroom, or locking the cat out of the room at night. For those who insist on having the pet in bed with them, she advises washing the sheets more frequently and perhaps adjusting their sleep schedule to match their pet's

routine.

"Maybe you need to go to bed earlier so you can get up earlier to accommodate the pet," she said.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it

Despite any problems, many pet owners feel that the bonding and emotional benefits outweigh minor sleep disruption.

Angela Wilson, who lives in Cobb County, Georgia, said she has bought a series of ever-more plush beds for her golden retriever, Sadie. But Sadie jumps into her bed anyway.

Then they usually sleep peacefully back to back.

"People complain about their dogs waking them up, but she doesn't wake me up," Wilson said. "She's very gentle."

FEATURE

I didn't expect to love a dog — until Sunny completed my blended family

My husband, Bruce, and I were standing over our 3-month-old, trying to coax him to sleep. We peered down as he let out a small whimper.

"Once he gets used to it, he'll be fine," I said.

"But he wants to sleep in our bed," Bruce protested.

"All the books say it's important for him to learn how to self-soothe," I countered.

"He's in a cage," Bruce said mournfully.

The cage was not a crib, but a crate. The 3-month-old in question was not our child, but our dog.

We do have children — six of them. When

Bruce and I got married a decade ago, our children — three of mine and three of his — ranged in age from 2 to 22.

"Just like the Brady Bunch," people commented. "Except we don't have the housekeeper," I replied. "Or the dog."

Until we did have the dog.

We'd been married for five years when the pandemic struck. On one of those early, awful days, my youngest came to me, clutching a picture, and made a declaration: "This is the dog of my heart." I was decidedly not a dog person, but felt desperate to ease the anxiety of the moment. "Don't you already have enough things to love?" my oldest asked when he saw that I was actually considering it. I knew he was right. With so many obligations to children and other family members, I often had the feeling of being entirely used up. And yet, despite all the reasons to say "no," I took in the pleading look on my youngest's face. I may not have been a dog person, but I was definitely a kid person.

A few weeks later, I held Sunny, a three-pound cavapoochon in my arms. When, two weeks in, he began to vomit and lose weight, I went back and forth to veterinary emergency rooms, where there was no clear diagnosis. "I don't think I can do this," I confided to Bruce. During the day, I squirted tiny droppers



Tova Mirvis



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL CONNECTION

A child's bond with a dog can help both of them during their developmental years.

of medicine into Sunny's mouth. At night, I stayed awake with him, rocking him and trying to soothe him, increasingly sure that this was more than a non-dog person could manage.

When it was Bruce's turn to stay up with Sunny, he held Sunny and sang Beatles songs to him. At the sight of this puppy in my husband's arms, I felt a bittersweet stirring.

We'd never considered having a baby together, not really. I was 42 when we got married. He was 52. No matter how old we were, six kids were clearly enough. But even so, I had sometimes indulged the idea.

"What do you think it would be like if we had a baby?" I asked Bruce from time to time.

"If we did, all the kids could bond over how much they hate the new baby," Bruce joked.

At my wistful expression, he grew alarmed. "Please tell me you're not serious."

I wasn't. Of course, I wasn't. Our commitment to the six we had was all-consuming. Bruce and I are close to each other's kids, but we're mindful not to overstep. All too aware of the pain of divorce and the complications of a blended family, we made the decision early on not to force togetherness, not to try to parent each other's kids, but rather to be steady, loving presences. We have engaged in a delicate balancing act of responsibilities and schedules, trying to ensure that no one feels slighted. Of the two of us, I have been the one more prone to worry about how, given the spread of our kids' ages and interests, we could hold together the different parts of our family. Bruce has been the one to offer assurances that everyone was going to be fine, that it was OK to sometimes resort to a divide-and-conquer tactic to navigate the often-overlapping occasions and obligations.

This fantasy of a baby, I knew, was less a desire for an actual baby and more a wishful foray into an alternate reality in which our paths had crossed when we were younger. Our marriage had come after so many of the pivotal moments in our lives had taken place. Over the years, I'd showed Bruce my college pictures and the baby al-



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL CONNECTION

Introducing a dog into a blended family can help bring people together.

bums I'd made of my kids, wanting him to know who I'd once been. Those photos sometimes seemed to have been taken on the other side of a great divide: my before life, which was hard to connect to the one I now lived. Every photo, even the ones I love, bore a watermark in my mind.

It was the same feeling when I listened to stories from when Bruce was younger, or studied pictures of him in college and in the years beyond, as he went to medical school, moved to California, became a father — all the parts of his life when he was still in the state of becoming. When I gazed at those photos of his younger self, I felt a longing for him, my not-yet husband, my one-day husband. I wished I could draw closer to this version of him, but it felt impossibly out of reach, more like a past life than just the past.

That feeling only increased when, on Facebook, I scrolled

past baby-faced wedding photos of college sweethearts still together decades later — they too might yearn for their past selves, but I envied the fact that it was a past they had shared together. What if, however improbable, I could rewind our lives back? What if my life, too, had progressed in this straight line? These questions picked at the scabbed wound of my divorce. I knew that even the wedding photos I gazed at contained more complicated stories; in most relationships, there were ruptures and transformations of every kind. I didn't believe anymore in the idea of the straight, untrammelled line, but I struggled to fully shed its hold over me.

Slowly, over many weeks, Sunny stopped vomiting. We still had no explanation for what had been wrong, but he started to gain weight. His coat grew thicker. I stopped worrying about whether I was a dog

person and started to work at my computer with Sunny on my lap, narrating what I was doing in the same high-pitched voice I'd once used with my children. We introduced Sunny to my stepson's two dogs and began to refer to Sunny as their uncle. It became a family game to see which of us Sunny loved the most. When we entered the house in a group, we waited to see who would be the lucky one to receive the first ecstatic greeting. Among all the kids, it was a joke that Sunny was the favorite. When I gave my stepdaughter my Netflix password — a variation of the dog's name — she laughed.

"Why am I not surprised?" she said.

"We all know you love Sunny the most," my oldest chimed in.

"Of course, we don't," I said. "Of course, we do," Bruce insisted.

But in this rivalry, there was no real heat. Enough time has elapsed that no one worried about being eclipsed — not by Sunny and, more importantly, not by one another. It might not have looked like the Brady Bunch, with the appearance of a seamless blend, but the sense of fragility that I'd worried so much about is gone. Our family has taken on its own kind of solidity, built by patience, presence and the passage of time.

It has become hard to remember a time we didn't have this dog. Bruce and I talk about him incessantly, to the point that all six kids roll their eyes at our devotion, especially at our newfound practice of turning on "Ms. Rachel" to keep Sunny company when we leave him alone for a few hours. We joke about having a second and analyze whether Sunny would feel displaced.

In our small disagreements about dog-rearing, I see parts of Bruce that take me by surprise, never imagining that he, usually so resolute, would be the one swayed by a whimper or an outstretched paw. I didn't know the part of him that would carry a dog home from a walk because Sunny looked a little tired or would be so smitten that he would slip Sunny a few more bites of cheese even when I'd declared that he'd had enough.

This experience offers me a window into what it might have been like to parent together — both the pleasures and the frustrations.

It isn't the same as a child, I know, and neither are we the same people we were when our own kids were young. As much as I imagine what it might have been like had we somehow met at the beginning, I also know that we would never have fit together back then, not yet the people we would need to be to belong with one another.

As our kids have moved on to new stages — starting high school, going away to college, getting married, having babies of their own — I have become all too aware that Sunny is the one who will remain at home with us. Only when we are taking care of Sunny can time seemingly rewind — as if those old photos of Bruce can merge with the man before me now. And it's not only Bruce's younger self I catch a glimpse of but my own. In taking care of this dog, it's almost like I can reach across that divorce divide and become once again that young mother tending to her small children, with everything that is eventually going to happen still in the distant future.

I hadn't realized how fully you could know a particular dog — how I would be able to decode the rise of his ears, the tilt of his head, the tone of a bark. I hadn't known how wholeheartedly you could love a dog — or that watching my husband love the dog in this same all-consuming way could expand my love for both of them.

At night now, in our increasingly empty house, we text the kids good night. In the other room, my youngest, the only child still at home, is on the phone with friends. Sunny, who sleeps in our bed every night now, stretches out on top of me, his front paws on my chest, his dark eyes gazing into mine.

"You are the greatest dog that ever lived," Bruce declares as he curls beside me.

I put my arms around both of them. "Mommy and Daddy love our fluffy little baby," I say.

It turns out that you can never have too many things to love.

FEATURE

At adoption event, shelter dog alerts man he is about to have a seizure



By Sydney Page
The Washington Post

At a recent adoption event, Sienna — a 3-year-old lab and pit bull mix — made a beeline for a man she'd never met and gently placed her paw on his leg.

"She saw him, and she started pulling on the leash very hard, which is not normal for her," said Jackie Poppe, a volunteer with Friends of Campbell County Animal Control in Rustburg, Virginia.

The adoption event was held at a church yard sale, and there were several booths with different vendors. Sienna, who needed a permanent home, was going from booth to booth greeting attendees — until she locked eyes with one man and headed directly for him.

Poppe tried to pull Sienna away, but she would not leave the man's side. That is when the man's wife — who had been shopping nearby — turned around and noticed something was wrong.

"He looked like he was definitely going to have a seizure," Kristen Davis said about her husband, Josh Davis, who has epilepsy. She said he appeared unwell and looked off-balance, the telltale signs a seizure could be imminent.

That day, June 7, Josh was also showing signs of a myoclonic seizure — his eyes were fluttering and jerking, his wife said. He had forgotten to take his morning meds.

Josh, 46, stands 6-foot-9, his wife noted.

"He is a big guy, so we didn't want him to fall in



PHOTO COURTESY OF KRISTEN DAVIS

FRIENDS OF CAMPBELL COUNTY ANIMAL CONTROL

Greg Sweeney picking up Sienna from the shelter on June 13.

Kristen Davis, left, with her husband, Josh Davis, and their 14-year-old daughter, Hannah Davis.

front of all those people,” Kristen said, adding that they live around the corner, and that she brought her husband straight home to lie down and take his meds.

He managed to avoid a full seizure — which Kristen believes was because her husband relaxed, and his self-administering vagus nerve stimulator probably delivered a stimulation burst. Josh has a vagus nerve stimulator — a device meant to help control seizures — implanted in his chest, though it doesn’t always stop them.

“If he hadn’t calmed down and went home to rest, even with the VNS, he was very likely to have a full-on convulsion seizure,” Kristen said.

Sienna was rescued as a stray on the streets of Altavista, Virginia, Poppe said, with no known training in seizure detection. Scientific studies have found both trained and untrained pet dogs can detect seizures, mainly using their sense of smell. Some canines can detect certain compounds in a person’s sweat during or before an epileptic seizure.

“We all knew she was lovable, and she was cute and amazing in the shelter, but we did not know that she had this ability,” Poppe said.

Kristen credits Sienna with preventing her husband from having a full seizure that day.

“She was honed into him, just the way she went straight to him and ignored some other people on the way,” Kristen said. “It seemed to me like what you see in the movies, when a dog alerts people.”

She said she couldn’t believe how fixated Sienna was on her husband.

“When he moved over a few steps, she did, too,” Kristen said. “She put her paw on his leg again.”

Josh was equally struck by the dog’s intuition.

“I was really surprised that Sienna came to me,



FRIENDS OF CAMPBELL COUNTY ANIMAL CONTROL

Sienna, a 3-year-old lab and pit bull mix, alerted a man that he was about to have a seizure at an adoption event on June 7.

FEATURE



Sarah McDonner, a volunteer for Wild Tunes, which aims to soothe stressed shelter animals with live music, plays the flute at the Denver Animal Shelter, on Friday, May 30.

THOMAS PEIPERT —
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Flutes for Fido: Volunteers play music to soothe shelter animals

By Thomas Peipert
The Associated Press

It's often said music is the universal language of humanity. Now a 12-year-old Houston boy is putting that to the test for an unlikely audience — man's best friend.

Yuvi Agarwal started playing keyboard when he was 4 and several years ago noticed his playing soothed his family's restless golden doodle, Bozo. He grew curious if it also could help stressed homeless animals.

With help from his parents, who both

have backgrounds in marketing, he founded the nonprofit Wild Tunes in 2023 to recruit musicians to play in animal shelters. So far he has enlisted about 100 volunteer musicians and singers of all ages and abilities to perform at nine shelters in Houston, New Jersey and Denver.

"You don't have to understand the lyrics to enjoy the music. Just enjoy the melody, the harmony and the rhythms. So it transcends linguistic barriers, and even it can just transcend species," Agarwal said recently after playing hits like The Beatles' "Hey Jude" and Ed Sheeran's "Perfect" on

his portable keyboard at the Denver Animal Shelter.

Agarwal, who was playing for an elderly miniature poodle named Pituca — Spanish slang sometimes used to describe a snob — said many of his four-legged listeners, which include cats, become excited when he enters their kennel. But after a few minutes of playing, they calm down. Some even fall asleep.

He remembers a rescue dog named Penelope that refused to come out of her enclosure in Houston to be fed.

"Within a short period of me playing,

she went from not even coming out of her kennel to licking me all over my face and nibbling my ears," Agarwal said.

A few stalls down from where he was jamming on his keyboard at the Denver shelter, volunteer Sarah McDonner played Mozart and Bach on her flute for Max, a 1-year-old stray boxer that tilted his head when she hit the high notes.

"The animals having that human interaction in a positive way, I think, gives them something to look forward to,

FLUTE » PAGE 22

Flute

FROM PAGE 7

thing that is different throughout their day,” said McDonner, a professional musician who met Argawal in Houston.

She helped bring the program to Colorado after moving to Denver a few months ago. “I think it’s very important to give them something different from what they’re used to in their little tiny cages ... and makes them more adoptable in the long run,” McDonner said.

While the effect of music on humans has been studied extensively, its role in animal behavior remains murky.

Several studies suggest that classical music generally has a calming influence on dogs in stressful environments like kennels, shelters and veterinary clinics. But some researchers warn there is not enough data to support the claim.

“We always want these really simplistic answers. So we want to say that music calms animals, for example, and I think that it’s much more nuanced than that,” said Lori Ko-

gan, a self-described “dog-person” who chairs the human-animal interaction section of the American Psychological Association. “There’s a lot more research that needs to happen before I think that we can unequivocally say that music is a great thing for animals.”

Kogan, a professor and researcher at Colorado State University, has studied for more than two decades how animals and humans get along. Research involving the effect of music on dogs often produces mixed results, she said, because there are so many variables: the setting; the volume, type and tempo of the music and the breed of the dog and its previous exposure to music.

She suggests a case-by-case approach to introducing music to animals.

“If you play music for your pet, and they seem to like it and they appear calmer, then I think we can say that that’s a positive thing, that you’re providing some level of enrichment for that pet. ... I would encourage people to give it a try and to see how their pets respond,” she said.

For Agarwal, his firsthand



THOMAS PEIPERT — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Yuvi Agarwal, the founder of Wild Tunes, which aims to soothe stressed shelter animals with live music, plays the keyboard at the Denver Animal Shelter, on Friday, May 30.

experience at shelters is undeniable evidence that music helps comfort stressed animals, and he plans to grow Wild Tunes

into a nationwide program. The volunteers get something out of it, too, he said.

“You get a really great way

to practice your instrument or sing in front of a nonjudgmental audience, which can boost your confidence,” he said.

Shelter

FROM PAGE 21

and it made me take my health more seriously that day,” Josh said. “I would have took her home right then and there if Kristen had agreed.”

Kristen said they have three rescue and don’t have the bandwidth to bring home another.

“I have my own health issues, and we just can’t take that on,” she said.

After the shelter shared a Facebook post about how Sienna detected Josh’s seizure, adoption requests flooded in.

“We’ve always known Sienna is special. But today, she reminded us that sometimes the ones we rescue are the ones who end up rescuing,” the post

said.

Several people with epileptic family members applied to adopt Sienna, but they all had a problem in common: They also had cats, and Sienna doesn’t get along well with them.

“Cats would not have been a good fit for her,” Poppe said.

One application stood out. Shannon Sweeney had applied to adopt Sienna before she even saw the post about the seizure detection.

She said she was drawn to Sienna because she looked like her late dog, Johnwood, who died last month at 11 years old.

But after reading about Sienna’s instincts, “it made us want her even more,” Shannon said. Her son Ransom, 28, has epilepsy — though he has not had a seizure in sev-

eral years.

“The timing has been unbelievable,” said Shannon, adding that her other son, Ethan, 24, was grieving after losing his pet rabbit that week and that he had taken Johnwood’s death especially hard.

“The companionship for him is such a big deal,” said Shannon, who lives in Roanoke.

Shannon and her husband picked up Sienna on June 13, and “she is settling in really, really well,” Shannon said. “We’re soaking it all up right now.”

Since arriving, Sienna has not left Ethan’s side.

“The bunny went everywhere with him, and now Sienna, not as conveniently bunny-sized, goes everywhere with him,” Shannon said. “Sienna is filling holes in our hearts.”



SHANNON SWEENEY

Ransom Sweeney, who is epileptic, with Sienna.

FEATURE

This woman turned 'death sentence' animal shelter into a place of hope

By Sydney Page
The Washington Post

The first day Courtney Proctor Cross walked into the Huntington, West Virginia, municipal animal shelter as its new director, she saw a dog in a crate barking frantically, standing up to his ankles in urine.

Dogs and cats were crammed into overcrowded wire crates, many with no water in the late-summer heat. Some of the cats had already died; others were barely hanging on.

"It was a nightmare," Proctor Cross said of that day in 2018. "We had no idea we were going to find this horrific scene, but that's what it was."

She helped ensure that barking dog got adopted — and thousands of others.

Before Proctor Cross arrived, the shelter was euthanizing between 50% to 75% of the animals that came in, she said, many of them healthy and adoptable, because they didn't have the funding or space to care for them.

In Huntington, a city where more than 27% of the population lives below the poverty line, public services have long been financially strained, including for animals.

"I couldn't even stand to drive by the shelter," said Proctor Cross, who was an elementary school teacher for 30 years. "Just looking at their little faces and knowing what was going to happen to most of them, it was really painful to think about."

Before becoming the ex-

ecutive director of the Huntington Cabell Wayne Animal Control Shelter, Proctor Cross volunteered with One by One Animal Advocates, a local rescue group that often clashed with the shelter's leadership.

"They would put a lot of restrictions on us," said Heather Aulick, president of the rescue group. "There were times they said our rescue couldn't pull any animals at all. They wanted to keep it all under wraps because most people didn't realize how bad it was."

Volunteers walked dogs at the shelter, only to return later and find the animals euthanized, Aulick said.

"You would walk a happy, wonderful dog one day and go back the next and they would have killed him for no reason," Aulick said. "That was just how they operated."

Proctor Cross — who has seven dogs of her own — decided to apply to run the shelter.

Steve Williams, the mayor of Huntington at the time, had been seeking new leadership when Proctor Cross put her name forward. He welcomed the idea.

"We were scraping every penny that we could to be able to get it into the shelter," Williams said. "What we were seeing at the shelter was just pitiful."

He thought new leadership — specifically, Proctor Cross — might help the situation. While a lack of funding was one issue, Williams said, the community wanted a different approach to shelter overcrowding. Rather than au-



Courtney Proctor Cross snuggling with Wayne, left, and Freddy.

HUNTINGTON CABELL WAYNE ANIMAL CONTROL SHELTER

tomatically euthanizing, they wanted the shelter to work with people who had fallen on hard times and did not have the resources to care for their pets.

"The people who were running it really didn't have the heart for it," he said. "They thought nothing about euthanizing these animals."

Proctor Cross was named director of the shelter in August 2018. She inherited not just financial woes and overcrowding, but also an aging building infested with mice and roaches, with poor ventilation and few windows.

"The first several years, we were slogging through every day," Proctor Cross said. "There were so many things wrong financially, in addition to the condition of the building and how the animals had been cared for. Getting all of that turned around was very much like trying to paddle upstream."

To bring change, Proctor Cross pushed for more government funding, secured corporate sponsorships and grants and created the Western West Virginia Animal Alliance, a nonprofit that supports the shelter.

She used social media to promote adoptable pets and partnered with local rescues, including One by One Animal Advocates and Advocates Saving Adoptable Pets. She also transformed an abandoned school building across the street into a second shelter space, which includes a surgical unit funded by a foundation in Boston. Her husband stepped in to help manage the shelter's finances, and volunteers and animal advocates rallied around her leadership.

There are usually between 350 to 400 animals in the shelter at a time, and the shelter generally takes in about 3,000 pets a year. It returns some to their owners, adopts out about a third of them, and sends the rest to rescues, Proctor Cross said. Less than 3% are eu-



HUNTINGTON CABELL WAYNE ANIMAL CONTROL SHELTER

Courtney Proctor Cross, director of the Huntington Cabell Wayne Animal Control Shelter in Huntington, West Virginia, with several shelter dogs.

thanized, and only in cases where they are severely ill or overly aggressive, she said.

"We're doing everything in our power to keep from doing that," Proctor Cross said.

Under Proctor Cross's leadership, the shelter is now designated as "no-kill," meaning a 90% placement rate for animals.

"It's been a collective effort from me, the community and the rescue groups," Proctor Cross said. "We have a lot of support from

people who really care."

Shelter staff credit Proctor Cross with leading the change.

They say she's known for answering her phone at all hours of the day and night.

"She will never tell people how much she gives and how much she does with so little," said Lee Domaszowec, a chief strategist at a nonprofit consulting company, who helped Proctor Cross develop fundraising and volunteer strategies.

"She really has built a

great team that has grossly exceeded expectations," Domaszowec said. "If there were more people like her, even one in every community, our country would be a much better place."

Lisa Krasnow, who worked in the shelter office from 2018 to 2022 and is now a volunteer, said the transformation is remarkable.

"The old shelter, when you would walk in and surrender a dog, it was pretty much a death sentence," Krasnow said.

But with Proctor Cross at the helm, she said, everything is different.

"Courtney has a vision, and she has a dream," Krasnow said. "She just doesn't quit. She goes above and beyond."

Proctor Cross — who re-invests most of her salary into the shelter — regularly drives employees without transportation to and from work, Krasnow said, and accompanies them to doctors' appointments and court hearings when they ask.

Proctor Cross said her dedication to the shelter is a way to honor her parents, both animal lovers who died in the 1970 crash of Southern Airways Flight 932, which killed 75 people, including 37 members of the nearby Marshall University football team. Proctor Cross was 6 years old.

"Everybody was crying and family members started coming," said Proctor Cross, adding that her father was a doctor for the team. "That's one of those lightning bolt events in life; it's before and after."

She struggled to grasp the enormity of the loss.

"I remember going to their funeral. There were closed caskets," Proctor Cross said between tears. "I thought if they could just disappear, maybe they could also reappear."

Proctor Cross grew up in Huntington, surrounded by animals — dogs, cats, rabbits, guinea pigs and fish. After her parents died, she moved in with her aunt and uncle in Fayetteville, West Virginia, and she and her siblings brought a dog and a cat with them.

She moved back to Huntington after high school to attend Marshall University.

"I always felt this connection to Huntington, and it made me feel closer to my parents," she said. "I think that the plane crash has impacted pretty much every facet of my life."

Last spring, Proctor Cross was featured on the cover of the local magazine, *Huntington Quarterly*.

"She is not just a local hero, she is a national example," Williams, the former mayor, said. "Her heart is bigger than the tallest mountains in West Virginia."

Proctor Cross said her work is far from done.

"There are so many more animals that need help," she said. "We've achieved so much, but I know there's probably that much more to do."

FEATURE

You can read with a cat on your lap at this bookstore, then adopt the feline

By Sydney Page
The Washington Post

At a bookstore in this Kansas town, three cats are on the full-time staff.

Hank, a domestic long-haired cat, is the “regional manager.” His job duties involve keeping track of the computer cursor and “sleeping in adorable positions 22 hours a day,” according to the bookstore website.

“He’s the boss of this place,” said Jennifer Mowdy, owner of the Literary Cat Co. in Pittsburg, Kansas — a bookstore that doubles as a cat lounge and feline foster home.

Scarlett Toe’Hara, a black short-haired cat, who is polydactyl — meaning she has extra toes — is the “assistant (to the) regional manager.” She is the front door guard, plant inspector and treat tester.

Mike Meowski — a domestic longhaired cat with one eye, named after Mike Wazowski in “Monster’s Inc.” — is “assistant (to the) assistant (to the) regional manager.” His role involves cuddling guests and quality control for boxes. Mowdy is a superfan of “The Office,” and so bestowed job titles based on the characters of Michael Scott and Dwight Schrute, respectively.

“They’re just perfect,” Mowdy said of her three-cat staff, all of which she rescued.

Mowdy opened the store in 2023 after 17 years as an educator. While teaching, Mowdy volunteered with animal rescues and fostered cats. She also loved bookstores.

“They’re much more than

a place you read books,” Mowdy said. “They’re a community hub.”

She wanted to fuse her two passions.

“I decided I could do it; I could create something,” Mowdy said.

There are typically about seven cats — in addition to Hank, Scarlett and Mike — who live in the bookstore as foster cats. They’re “temporary staff,” and Mowdy’s goal is for her customers to adopt them.

“We partner with a rescue, and when they get a cat that they think has a personality that would fit, or they haven’t been successful in adopting a cat through other means,” she said. “If we have the room, we take them in.”

Many of the cats she fosters are older, or “have been overlooked for a long time,” she said. The cats come from SEK Animal Advocates, a local rescue network.

“Her adoption rate is fabulous,” said Susan Bastion, director of the rescue network. “Having a big open space where the animals can walk around and stretch their legs and interact with the general public is huge.”

Since opening the Literary Cat Co. about a year and a half ago, 32 foster cats Mowdy has brought to the store have been adopted by her customers, and another is in the works. In some cases, people have taken home two cats at a time.

Lori Seiwert and her husband adopted a brother-sister duo from the Literary Cat Co. shortly after it opened. The cats are named



Jennifer Mowdy, owner of the Literary Cat Co., with her cat Scarlett Toe'Hara. Scarlett is one of the permanent staff at the bookstore.

THE LITERARY CAT CO.



THE LITERARY CAT CO.

Boots lounges on the front desk at the Literary Cat Co. bookstore in Kansas.

Frog and Toad after the picture book.

"We fell in love with them when we went and visited," Seiwert said.

Frog, who is male, and Toad, who is female, turned 2 this year. Seiwert said she and her husband often stop by the store to visit Mowdy and play with the other cats.

"It's a nice thing for such a small community," she said. "It's very homey."

Most cats are adopted within six months of arriving at the bookstore, though some find homes much faster; others have stayed for up to a year.

"We don't give up on them," Mowdy said, adding that she keeps in touch with most adopters. "This is the whole point; this is why we're doing it — to see them go to good homes."

Mowdy looks after the cats with Caitlin Fanning, a bookseller. They also have a volunteer who visits the store on Sundays and Mondays when it is closed to feed the cats and care for them.

The bookstore is near Pittsburg State University, so college students often bring their own books to study there and snuggle some cats.

"We've got lots of cozy chairs and reading nooks," Mowdy said. "Lots of people don't buy anything, they just come and play with the cats. That's perfectly okay. We need to get the cats socialized, too."

Most people who stop by the store "spend quite a bit of time," she said. "They'll curl up in a

chair with a cat and read."

The bookstore has become an environment for shy or unsocialized cats to get comfortable around people.

"It really, really just turns them around," Mowdy said.

The cats have free roam of the bookstore, and are never confined to a cage.

"The way that people see them during the day is the way they are all the time," Mowdy said.

Before leaving work for the day, "we just make sure everybody is fed and watered, and anybody that needs meds gets them," Mowdy said. "We tell them goodnight and don't cause any trouble, and we see them in the morning."

Mowdy was initially hesitant about opening the bookstore, which was recently featured in a popular TikTok video by That Good News Girl.

"I started over in my forties, which is a very, very scary place to be," Mowdy said. "I'm not a risk-taker."

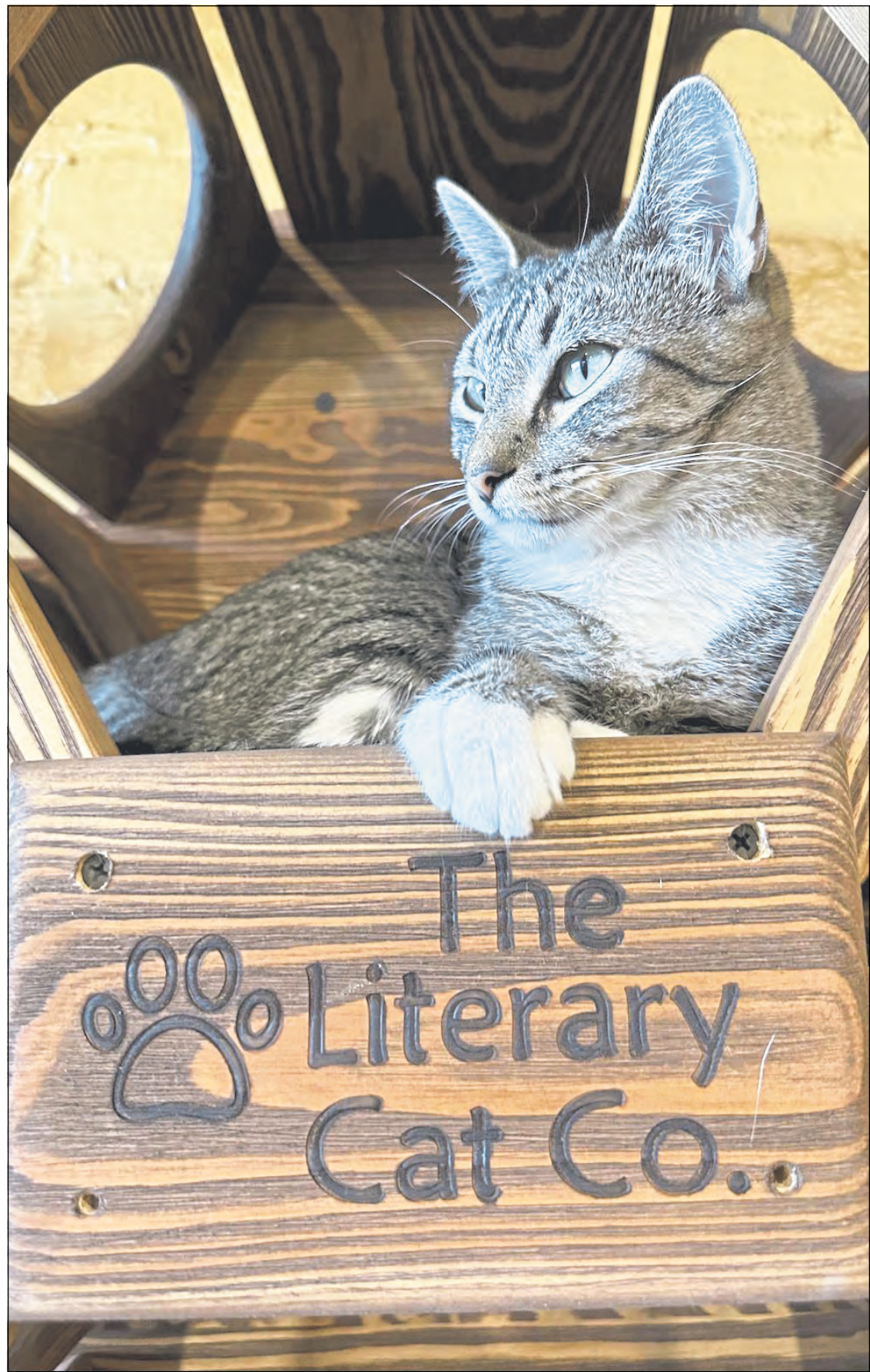
But Mowdy said things have turned out better than she imagined.

"People have just been so, so super supportive," Mowdy said.

As far as books go, the Literary Cat Co. carries a wide range of authors and genres, though. "I will order any cat book I see, both adult and kids," Mowdy said.

She said her bookstore has already made a difference, and she hopes this is only the beginning.

"I am so proud," Mowdy said. "It's like a dream."



THE LITERARY CAT CO.

Precious, a foster cat, patrols the bookstore.

FEATURE

These colleges are welcoming pets in dorms to reduce students' stress and anxiety

By Cheyanne Mumphrey

The Associated Press

Crossing paths with dogs, cats and other animals is part of campus life for students at Eckerd College, a liberal arts school in Florida that allows pets to live in dormitories.

Sophie Nocera, an Eckerd senior, said she probably knows the names of pets better than her fellow students.

"That's the case for a lot of the students," said Nocera, who lives on the campus in St. Petersburg with her Border collie, Zuko. "When I'm walking my dog, I often hear, 'Oh my god, hi, Zuko!' It's like I'm not even there."

Some colleges and universities around the country welcome pets in campus residences, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to Stephens College in Missouri.

For students, the companionship can help reduce stress, anxiety and homesickness. The colleges also see benefits for student engagement and helping them build connections with one another.

Federal law requires public and private colleges to allow service animals and emotional support animals in student housing. But growing numbers of schools are allowing pets, with various restrictions.

Not all animals are welcome on pet-friendly campuses

MIT allows only cats, in limited numbers and in preapproved spaces. At Eckerd, students can bring their family pets to live with them on campus after their first semester. The college requires pets to have been part of students' home life at least six months before coming to campus and must not be venomous or aggressive.

At the University of Northern Colorado, students in three of the

more than dozen residence halls on campus are allowed to have dogs and cats. The animals must be at least 6 months old and no more than 40 pounds. Students are limited to one pet. This fall, the school will have the most registered pets on campus since it began allowing them over a decade ago, said Jediah Cummins, executive director of housing.

"One of the markers of adulthood is, 'Can I not just take care of myself, but can I take care of another living being?' That's an important part of this," Cummins said.

Molly Cheer, a senior nursing major, said she chose Northern Colorado in part because of its pet-friendly policy. When she is stressed about school, she said, it helps coming home to Louie, the cat she adopted during her first year.

"Whenever I'm feeling stressed or overwhelmed, I pick him up and cuddle him, and he just deals with it for as long as I need it," she said.

Eckerd has had pet-friendly dorms since 1973. Jack Layden, assistant dean for residential life and student engagement, said the college has hosted hundreds of animals, including rabbits, ferrets, chinchillas, birds, guinea pigs, bearded dragons, geckos, turtles, snakes, frogs, fish, and even a tarantula.

Pets change the college experience for their owners

Nocera said Zuko has helped her meet other people on campus, as well as emotionally, when she struggled with a decision to change her major.

"I remember coming back to my dorm and just melting to the floor, and Zuko was right there. And I remember thinking, whatever happens tomorrow, I'm going to wake up, and I'm going to take him to the dog park. And, we're going to go play fetch regardless



THOMAS PEIPERT — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Student Molly Cheer sits with her pet comfort cat, Louie, in her dorm room at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Colo., on Monday, Aug. 25.

of what my major is," said Nocera, who is the staff director of Pet Life, a student-led department on campus tasked with administering the pet policy.

At Washington & Jefferson College in Pennsylvania, Eva Chatterjee-Sutton saw the difference a pet can make when a first-year student was struggling to make connections before her mother suggested a puppy. After the dog's arrival, the student became more involved in campus life, said Chatterjee-Sutton, vice president of student life.

"I think it's absolutely changed her college trajectory and her connection with others on campus," Chatterjee-Sutton said.

Residence halls set boundaries, get creative to support pet owners

Pet-friendly dorms require colleges to consider things like safety concerns, noise complaints, how to avoid agitating animals during fire alarm tests, as well as additional costs for cleaning, Layden said.

Some schools charge a pet fee, which varies by school, type of pet and is often included in housing expenses. For example, at Stephens College, the annual fee for a dog or cat is \$220, for a cage- or aquarium-dwelling pet is \$50 and free for fish. Others require students to have liability insur-

ance and roommate agreements. Pets are required to be restrained when in public, and most colleges require students to ensure their pets are healthy and vaccinated.

Eckerd and other colleges recognize pets' role in their students' lives at graduation ceremonies, allowing them to cross the commencement stage together in some cases.

"Having pets obviously isn't for everyone, and that is totally OK," Nocera said. "But for the people that it is a good fit for, it is so worth it. This upcoming year, I'll be graduating, and Zuko will be in his little pet graduation ceremony, walking across the stage with me."

Dogs have a way of
connecting with and
winning over their
human companions.
PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO
EDITORIAL CONNECTION



HEALTHY PETS ARE
HAPPY PETS

HEALTH

Keeping pets healthy throughout the year

Michigan's state veterinarian shares tips for animal care as seasons change

Heat
Pet Safety Tips

Let it Flow
No matter the species, animals should have access to unlimited cool, clean, fresh water to prevent dehydration and heat exhaustion.

Happy Paws
Surfaces like asphalt, concrete, and sand can really heat up in the sun, which can burn paws. Consider taking a different route that is mostly grass.

Know Their Limit
Animals' age, breed, type of coat, and health history can all play a role in their ability to tolerate the heat. Keep an eye on them for signs of heat stress—like increased panting or drooling and being more lethargic. If they are showing these signs, it is time to immediately move them to a cooler area.

Get in Gear
Vehicles can heat up very quickly, creating dangerous conditions. It is best to leave pets at home when you need to go out and about.

A Place to Chill
Animals know when they are too hot and will usually try to find a place where they can cool down. Make sure they have a place to cool down.

Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development
michigan.gov/mdard/animals

By Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development

michigan.gov/mdard/animals

The Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) recognized National Pet Preparedness Month in June. While the month is dedicated to the health and safety of animals during times of natural or man-made disasters, it is just as important to consider their everyday wellness every day of the year.

"Any animal preparedness plan should begin with considering their general wellness. Working with your veterinarian can help ensure that you are doing everything possible to maintain their good health," said State Veterinarian Dr. Nora Wineland. "Keeping up with their core vaccinations, taking simple preventative steps to avoid illness, and making sure they have current identification can all help safeguard animals' health and safety under any circumstance."



Dr. Nora Wineland

Vaccines can play a critical role in preventing numerous diseases—some of which are zoonotic, meaning they can affect animals and people. For dogs, cats, ferrets, horses, and other animals, a core vaccination is for rabies. Rabies is zoonotic, often fatal, and carried by certain wildlife species including bats and skunks in Michigan.

Pets and other animals can get rabies from bites or other interactions with rabid animals.

As of mid-June, there had been 15 cases of rabies detected across the state in bats. Highly safe and effective vaccines are available to protect animals against this virus.

Vaccinations also are vital to protecting the health of horses, especially from several mosquito-borne diseases, including West Nile virus (WNV), Eastern equine encephalitis (EEE) and Western equine encephalitis (WEE).

alitis.

WNV and EEE are regularly seen in Michigan with EEE being particularly fatal.

In 2023, four cases of WNV in horses were discovered and one confirmed case of EEE.

For a majority of these detections, the animals were either unvaccinated or under-vaccinated. Several horses died or were euthanized due to the severity of their illness.

There are many other diseases that can impact the health of your animals. Contacting your veterinarian can help not only determine what vaccinations are best for your animals but also make sure these vaccinations are up to date.

Beyond vaccinations, talking to your veterinarian can ensure other steps are in place to prevent disease in your animals.

Simple actions like washing your hands before caring for your animals, placing your shoes in an area where your animals cannot reach them, making sure animals do not have contact with wildlife, avoiding interactions with sick animals or animals with unknown health status, and avoiding shared bowls or toys can help maintain their good health.

By reviewing how you care for your animals, your veterinarian can reveal some new ideas and strategies for keeping them healthy.

A final way to ensure the safety of your animals is to double check they have up-to-date identification. Whether they slip their leash, sneak out the door, jump a fence, or become lost during a hectic situation, it is vital for animals to have current identification tags and/or registered microchips so they can be quickly returned once they are found.

Visiting your veterinarian can help you with verifying and/or obtaining your animals' identification.

Overall, by thinking about the health and safety of your animals today, both you and your animals can be better prepared for any situation tomorrow.

Summertime

As temperatures rise into the 90s in many parts of the state, MDARD is reminding owners on some of the best ways to keep animals cool and safe.

"When temperatures rise, keeping animals cool and hydrated is essential to their overall health," Wine-land said. "While it is important to recognize the signs of heat stress in animals, it is even more critical to prevent this stress from occurring. Michiganders can follow six easy steps to help keep animals cool and safe."

Keep animals safe from the heat by following these tips:

- **Let it Flow:** Provide unlimited cool, clean, fresh water. Just like people, animals can quickly get parched in hot temperatures. No matter the species, animals should have access to unlimited cool, clean, fresh water to prevent dehydration. Also, if out in public, bring along some hydration options for your animal and avoid using shared/communal water bowls.

- **Know Their Limits:** An animal's ability to tolerate heat varies. An animal's age, breed, type of coat, and health history can all play a role in their ability to tolerate the heat. Keep an eye on them for signs of heat stress, like increased panting or drooling and being more lethargic. If they are showing these signs, it is time to immediately move them to a cooler area. Also, consider talking to your veterinarian. They will have a greater knowledge of your animal(s) and be able to give more specific guidance on how to best handle them in hot weather.

- **Happy Paws:** Test surfaces to make sure they

won't burn paws. Surfaces like asphalt, concrete and sand can really heat up in the sun, which can burn paws or at least make a walk very uncomfortable. To test if a surface is too hot, touch it with the palm of your hand. If it is too hot for you, consider taking a different route that is mostly grass or waiting until the evening when everything has had a chance to cool.

- **Look Before They Splash:** Avoid harmful algal blooms (HABs) in bodies of water. HABs form due to a rapid growth of cyanobacteria, also called blue-green algae, which are naturally found in lakes, rivers, and ponds. To prevent illness in animals, keep them out of areas with scums or discolored water, rinse them off after contact with any lake water, and bring clean, fresh water for them to drink. If an animal becomes sick after contact with a suspected HAB, call your veterinarian right away. Also, animal illness due to HABs is reportable to MDARD. To report cases, call 800-292-3939. In addition, to report any suspicious looking algae, email algaebloom@michigan.gov.

- **Get in Gear:** Parked vehicles are not places to park pets. Even when temperatures feel more moderate, vehicles can heat up very quickly, creating dangerous conditions for the animals left inside. Leaving windows cracked open and/or parking in the shade do little to improve the situation. In these conditions, it is best to leave pets at home when you need to go out and about.

- **A Place to Chill:** Make sure animals have a place to cool down. Animals know when they are too hot and will usually try to find a place where they can cool down. Make sure they have access to shade, fans, misters, pools, cooling mats, and/or air-conditioned spaces to help them stay comfortable.



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Year

FROM PAGE 31

Springtime

“Spring holiday celebrations are filled with food, family, and loved ones, including our pets. It is important to consider their needs as we plan our festivities,” Wineland said. “From keeping them away from eating chocolate and candy to ensuring they have a quiet space to destress, there are many actions we can take to make sure they have a safe holiday.”

Keep pets safe in the spring by following these tips:

- **Happy Tummies:** Avoid feeding pets people foods. Unfortunately, pets cannot enjoy all of the same foods and treats we do. Foods not specifically formulated for pets should be avoided as they could cause pancreatitis, even when consumed in small amounts. Also, be sure to keep candy and other sweets containing chocolate, raisins, and/or xylitol (an artificial sweetener found in many candies and gum) away from pets as these ingredients can be hazardous.

- **Avoid Temptations:** Keep holiday decorations out of reach. Brightly colored plastic Easter grass or other basket fillers may make for a beautiful presentation, but it can also catch the eye of our pets. If consumed, the filler could cause intestinal blockages or other injuries. Be sure to remove filler from baskets completely or at least keep the baskets out of a pet's reach, along with candles, lights, plastic eggs/toys, and some festive flowers/plants, especially Easter lilies as these are highly toxic to cats.

- **Go Natural:** Save the dye for eggs — not pets. As a reminder, in Michigan, it is illegal to sell baby chicks, rabbits, ducklings or other fowl or game that have been dyed or artificially colored



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(Public Act 163 of 1945). Violating this law is a misdemeanor, so keep animals their natural color.

- **Search No More:** Make sure pets have proper identification. With all the holiday activity, pets can easily sneak out and get lost. Make sure pets have identification tags and microchips updated with your current contact information to ensure they can be returned home.

- **Destress and Decompress:** Have a quiet space for your pets. Any holiday celebration can be loud and overly stimulating for pets. So, it is important to have a quiet space set aside for them to go if they are getting too stressed. Also, have the room stocked with their food, water, litter pan, etc. in case they want to maintain their distance for an

extended period of time.

- **More Than Novelties:** Bunnies and chicks are forever pets. While it may be tempting to surprise someone with a real bunny, chick or duckling, it is important to remember these animals are long-term pets, often requiring specialized care and feed. Many people feel unprepared to properly care for one of these animals and hand them over to local animal control or an animal shelter. Opt for gifting someone a stuffed or chocolate animal instead.

Holidays

These tips can help keep your animals safe and healthy throughout the holidays:

- **Treat them Right:** Avoid feeding animals chocolate or other candy. While it may be tempting to share

a sweet treat with your animal, they cannot enjoy all the same foods we do. Any type of chocolate or treat sweetened with xylitol (an artificial sweetener found in many candies and gum) can be poisonous to animals. Instead of these sweets, stick to their normal treats.

- **Avoid Temptations:** Keep holiday decorations out of reach. Gift wrap, ribbons and balloons can make a celebration special, but they can also catch the eye of our pets. If consumed, these items could cause intestinal blockages or other injuries. Be sure these items are out of their reach, along with candles as curious paws and excited tails should not be near an open-flame unsupervised.

- **Build a Better Bouquet:** Make sure all arrangements

are pet friendly. Whether flowers and plants are given as a gift or used as a decoration, not all of these plants are safe for your animals. Flowers with thorns (like roses) can cause injury if bitten, swallowed, or stepped on; and certain floral varieties (like lilies, chrysanthemums and tulips) can be dangerous for pets if they are ingested. Keep these items away from pets and make arrangements with plants that are not toxic to animals.

- **Share the Love, Not the Germs:** Keep animals up to date on routine vaccinations. Vaccinations are central to animals' preventative care as the vaccines can protect them against common diseases, such as rabies and distemper. Contact your veterinarian to ensure your animals' vacci-

nations are complete and/or to schedule an appointment.

- **Be a Secret Admirer:** Consider donating to the Animal Welfare Fund. Not every animal has someone to count on as many are waiting at one of Michigan's 209 registered animal shelters for their forever home. When generous Michiganders check the Animal Welfare Fund's box on Form 4642, Voluntary Contributions Schedule, on their state tax returns, 100% of the contributions go directly to these shelters to help them better care for local animals and support their broader community. Consider donating to the fund to keep the good going by continuing to protect local animals and increasing their chances of adoption into a loving home.

HEALTH

Here's what to know about cat reproduction

Pet owners must take many things into consideration in their quest to keep animals healthy and happy.

One of those considerations involves animal reproductive health.

Veterinarians as well as animal welfare organizations urge pet owners to spay or neuter their pets, not only to provide various health benefits, but to help reduce overpopulation in pet communities.

Cat pet parents must be especially diligent in their quest to squelch reproduction to help control cat populations.

According to The Spruce: Pets, female cats that are not spayed will come into estrus (heat) as early as four months old. The animal health resource BondVet says a cat can go into heat as often as every two to three weeks. Generally, though, cats are seasonal breeders, meaning heat cycles slow down in autumn.

Another thing to note is that cats do not enter menopause like people and other animals. That means a female cat can continue to reproduce well into her senior years.

Cats can become pregnant even during the first estrus cycle. A feline's pregnancy lasts around 63 to 65 days, or about nine weeks.

A cat also can be impregnated again very quickly after giving birth, as nursing kittens will not prevent a subsequent pregnancy.

The average litter size is three to six kittens, so it's easy to see just how many kittens can be born of one cat if she's left to her own reproductive devices. Females also can be mated by more than one male or even one of their male relatives.

While there is still some debate among veterinarians as to the best age at which to spay or neuter cats, the general consensus seems to be the earlier the better, particularly if cats have access to other cats that are not fixed. This can occur as early as age six to eight weeks, while standard spays and neuters occur at five to six months of age.

Vets who advocate for spaying before the first heat say it nearly eliminates the risk of mammary cancer, and spayed cats will not develop ovarian and uterine cancers, according to PetMD.

Physiologically and behaviorally, cats are built to reproduce as frequently as possible.

Pet owners must put a stop to that to protect against overpopulation and to reduce unwanted behaviors like inappropriate marking, aggression and other issues.

— By Metro Editorial Services

While there is still some debate among veterinarians as to the best age at which to spay or neuter cats, the general consensus seems to be the earlier the better, particularly if cats have access to other cats that are not fixed.



HEALTH

Ask a vet: My dog's achy bones are slowing him down. What can I do?

Q: What are the best ways to maintain a dog's joint health? Notably, we have a black Lab mix who is about 75 pounds and he gets stiff a lot. Does he need more exercise? Less exercise? Joint supplements?

A: Assuming your dog has degenerative joint disease (or osteoarthritis, the most common cause of stiffness in dogs), the best remedies are controlled exercise, weight management and physical rehabilitation (massage, strengthening exercises, etc.). The sooner these begin, the better. If you want to try supplements, choose one that contains omega-3 fatty acids. If your dog still seems uncomfortable, your veterinarian can prescribe anti-inflammatory medications, which are more effective for pain control than supplements. For dogs with severe arthritis, joint surgeries are an option, but they are expensive and carry risks.



Jane Sykes

What causes joint problems in dogs?

The most common joint problem in dogs is a degenerative condition called osteoarthritis, which involves inflammation and breakdown of joint tissues that can significantly impair a dog's quality of life. In a U.S. study of 131,140 dogs examined at primary care clinics over a 20-year period, almost one-quarter of dogs developed this condition.

For simplicity, I'll use the term "arthritis" rather than osteoarthritis, but there are other causes of arthritis, such as auto-



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immune problems. Cruciate ligament (ACL) tears, diseases of the spine, endocrine diseases, and heart and lung problems can also cause stiffness, lameness and exercise intolerance. It's important to get an accurate diagnosis to make sure your dog gets the proper treatment. Your vet can do that based on a medical history, examination and X-rays.

Arthritis typically affects older dogs, but the underlying trigger is often congenital joint problems, like hip and elbow dysplasia. Arthritis can also follow a traumatic joint injury. Medium to large dogs (think retrievers) are at greater risk, along with overweight and "sturdier" dogs (with a higher weight-to-height ratio).

Does exercise help dogs with arthritis?

According to Denis Marcellin-Little, a veterinary orthopedic surgeon who is also board-certified in sports medicine and rehabilitation, overdoing exercise can worsen lameness in dogs with arthritis, but "controlled or modified exercise is one of the

most powerful things that you can do to slow disease progression." Exercising your dog costs only time — and it's good for both of you.

If your dog's lameness worsens with exercise, try reducing the duration, frequency or intensity, but don't eliminate it.

Or change the type of exercise; try walking or swimming

instead of running.

Do special diets help dogs with arthritis?

There are special diets marketed for dogs with arthritis, but it's best to focus on keeping your dog trim; even being slightly overweight can make a difference.

Not sure whether your dog is overweight? The Association for Pet Obesity Prevention provides information on healthy weight ranges for many dog breeds, how to score your dog's body condition and how to calculate caloric requirements. Your veterinarian can also help your dog achieve an optimal body weight.

Can physical therapy help dogs with arthritis?

Four types of physical rehabilitation (the veterinary term for physical therapy) can help relieve discomfort — energy application (such as heat, ultrasound or laser therapy); manual therapy (massage, stretching); specific exercises that improve strength and balance; and environmental changes to improve comfort, balance and mobility (such as nonslip flooring).

"The most difficult thing is knowing how many of these things to implement; sometimes less is more," Marcellin-Little says. "If your dog's pain and mobility are improved with exercise and weight management, these might not add benefit — and exercise can be more fun, efficient and affordable."

What about joint supplements?

A dizzying number of supplements have been studied for their effect on arthritis pain in dogs, including omega-3 fatty acids (green-lipped mussel,

fish oil), collagen, glucosamine/chondroitin, turmeric, elk velvet antler and vitamin E.

If you want to try a supplement, look for products that contain omega-3 fatty acids, but these need to be dosed properly.

The benefits of other supplements are less clear.

Can I give my dog human pain medications?

No! Over-the-counter pain medications for humans, like ibuprofen and acetaminophen, are toxic for pets.

What prescription medications are available?

Several safe prescription nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) can significantly reduce arthritis pain in dogs — examples include carprofen, firocoxib, grapiprant and meloxicam. Side effects (typically gastrointestinal, liver and kidney problems) occur in fewer than 5% of dogs. If your dog doesn't improve after a couple of weeks of treatment, don't give up. Some dogs can take months to fully respond. And if one type of anti-inflamma-

tory pill doesn't work, your vet might prescribe a different type. Bedinvetmab is another type of drug that can help. Given once a month by injection under the skin, bedinvetmab works by binding to a pain-causing substance in joint fluid called nerve growth factor (NGF). In a small trial of 100 dogs, bedinvetmab was as effective as meloxicam for pain control. "There's still a lot to learn about safety of NGF inhibitors when compared with NSAIDs," says Marcellin-Little. However, evidence of bedinvetmab's safety is growing.

Other medications that

can help dogs with arthritis that are not responding fully to other treatments include amantadine, gabapentin, pregabalin and tramadol. Joint injections used in people (like platelet-rich plasma and hyaluronic acid) are also sometimes given to dogs but need more study.

Will my dog need surgery?

Despite these treatments, in some dogs, arthritis progresses to the point that it is debilitating and impairing quality of life.

In these situations, joint

surgeries — especially hip replacement and knee surgery — can provide a cure, but these can cost several thousand dollars and are not without risk.

By staying ahead of arthritis with exercise, weight control and pain management, in the long run, surgery might be avoidable altogether.

Jane Sykes is a professor of veterinary medicine at the University of California-Davis. She is a board-certified specialist in small animal (dog and cat) internal medicine with a special interest in infectious diseases.



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HEALTH

I loved my 17-year-old dog. When was the right time to let her go?

By **Steven Petrow**

Special to The Washington Post

I remember sitting in a dreary examination room talking with the veterinarian.

Her patient was my 17-year-old Jack Russell terrier, who was not just certifiably old, but suffering from arthritis and dementia. Zoe would get lost in the house, often staring into a corner of the dining room, then begin to howl. I asked the vet, "How will I know?" Unspoken but understood was, "How will I know when it's time to say goodbye, to let her go?"

The vet sent me home that day with a pamphlet containing a short quiz meant to evaluate Zoe's quality of life. The 16 questions covered changes in breathing, pacing, signs of pain, loss of appetite, uncontrolled urination and bowel movements, lack of sociability, signs of anxiety, and changes in nighttime activity, among other factors.

I answered to the best of my ability in an online version, then tallied up my score. The assessment: "Zoe's quality of life is quite concerning. It is likely that changes will continue to occur and become more severe in the near future."

When I spoke with the vet a few days later, she put it to me this way: "Zoe is in the window where this choice makes sense. It is not too soon to consider this option. ..."

That was the permission I had sought, but it still felt too soon, which is a common reaction among pet owners.

Frank Andonoplas, who chose to put his bichon frisé to sleep at the age of 18, told me it was "the worst and hardest experience of my life, worse than losing my parents." I understood that. Many of us experience unconditional love with our pets, which truthfully is not always the case with Mom and Dad. Zoe had been a huge emotional support through the deaths of my parents and my divorce, and I felt I owed her. In retrospect, I wonder what it was I owed her — more life or less suffering?

Deciding on the right time to euthanize a beloved dog or cat can be excruciating. Many pet owners hope for a natural death, but as Mary Gardner, CEO and co-founder of the Lap of Love Veterinary Hospice net-



DREAMTIME — DREAMTIME/TNS

There isn't really a magic formula for knowing when it's time, said veterinarian Robin Holmes, who worked in general practice for 20 years until 2013, when she founded Gifts of Peace, an in-home pet euthanasia service serving the San Gabriel Valley.

work, told me, a natural death is not always a peaceful one. An animal may be in respiratory distress, or kidney or heart failure. Reluctant to euthanize too soon, pet owners may wait too long, when their pet is suffering.

"I get it that you don't want to lose a day, or an hour with a loved one," says Gardner, but added, "There is a saying that a week too soon is better than a day too late." A

friend, Douglas Smith, who has put two beloved dogs down, agreed: "It was so very hard to make the decision, but I knew it was the right thing. ... Don't prolong their suffering because you're afraid."

When it comes to pain, there are three general categories, vets say.

The first is pain from arthritis or a spinal issue.

The second is pain associated with dis-

ease or organ failure. Those two are relatively easy to understand because we can usually recognize their symptoms. But the third type of suffering is emotional, and we don't always associate anxiety, depression and cognitive disorders with pain — or even with our pets.

But if a dog or cat is howling, whining, panting or drooling, that animal is suffering



LEONARD ORTIZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dr. Robin Holmes, owner of Gifts of Peace Home Pet Euthanasia, with her dog Ziggy at her home in Sierra Madre on Thursday, June 22, 2023. Holmes is a Southern California veterinarian who specializes in home euthanasia for pets.

ing. I wish I had better understood that during Zoe's last months, when she still loved to walk and play, but would howl every night. That is why the quality-of-life scale I had filled out contains five mental health questions in addition to physical and social ones.

When to treat or stop?

Just because we can continue to medically treat our pets doesn't mean we should. "It doesn't make you a better pet owner," Gardner said. It does mean you can afford it, not only monetarily, but in terms of time (taking them to

the vet, physical therapy), emotional cost (comforting them, cleaning up after them) and the physical demands (carrying them, positioning them for an IV treatment). It's a lot. In my Zoe's case, when she would no longer eat dog food, I took to cooking for her on a daily basis, trying to tempt her with scrambled eggs, rice and eggs, and even chopped chicken.

The cost

Whether you take your pet to your vet's office or to an animal emergency center or bring a vet to the house, euthanasia usually

costs around \$300 to \$500, although there are regional differences.

At the Animal Humane Society, the fee for dogs and cats is about \$100; guinea pigs and reptiles are about half that amount. (Those fees don't include cremation.)

The medicines to put a pet to sleep

The gold standard for euthanasia is a two-step process.

The American Veterinary Medical Association recommends a sedative to start. It's usually injected

into a muscle or under the skin and can take five to 10 minutes for the animal to fall asleep or enter a nice swoozy state without pain or anxiety. The second medicine is pentobarbital sodium, which has been successfully used for veterinary euthanasia procedures since the early 20th century. It takes effect in a few seconds.

Making it a 'good' death

Both experts and pet owners offered numerous suggestions for once you have made the decision:

- Try to give your pet their best day or several days in advance, providing special treats, places and toys.

- Remember that your pet doesn't understand death (or fear it).

- Ask a close friend or family to be with you during the process, for support and then comfort.

- Once you realize that your pet is in pain and distress, putting off euthanasia doesn't make it easier on you or the pet; it could make it harder, especially if your pet dies alone or in pain.

- Ask your vet if they will

come to your house for the procedure. Many animals suffer great anxiety at their vet's office, and the process may be more peaceful at home.

- Vets who go to you will usually take the animal with them if you choose cremation. That's what I did with my Zoe. It broke my heart to carry her lifeless body to the car, but I knew I had done right by her.

I asked Mary Gardner for a last piece of advice: "Say 'I love you' to your pet every day because when they pass, you'll wish you could say it one more time."

HEALTH

Ask a vet: Why does my pet lick me so much?

Q: Why does my pet lick me? Is it safe to let them do it?

A: Dogs and cats may lick humans to show empathy or affection — or simply to get your attention. For healthy adults, the risk of illness after being licked by a pet that receives regular veterinary care is negligible. But when dogs and cats lick people with weak immune systems, serious infections can follow.



Jane Sykes

Here's what to know about why pets do this, and when you should be concerned:

Why do dogs and cats lick people?

More than 60% of U.S. households include a pet, for good reason: pet ownership reduces loneliness, depression and anxiety. Rustin Moore, dean of the veterinary school at Ohio State University and author of “Unleashing the Bond: Harnessing the Power of Human-Animal Interactions,” says this bond “has a profound power to heal, comfort and connect us; it is one of the most underutilized tools for improving human well-being.” Animal-assisted therapy is increasingly used in schools, nursing homes, hospices, prisons and hospitals, with benefits that include reduced pain perception, more rapid recovery from surgery, and improved emotional skills in children with disorders, such as autism.

Licking is a common behavior in pets. In a 2020 study from Belgium, hand-licking by dogs was reported by 86% of owners — and face-licking by 50% of owners. In a study in the United Kingdom, more than 50% of people said their dogs licked visitors, too.

Animals lick other animals for many reasons. New moms lick their babies to clean and



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protect them (saliva has certain antibacterial properties, which also could explain why animals lick their wounds).

Animals also lick one another during “social grooming,” a bonding behavior that is particularly common in cats. A dog may lick humans to show empathy. And — given the opportunity — pets will meticulously lick skin that has traces of food or salty sweat on it.

When it's reinforced by positive social interactions (such as

petting and a soothing voice), licking also can be a way to get attention.

Genetics, other environmental influences, and age also influence licking behavior. In the U.K. study, younger dogs were more likely to lick people than older dogs.

Are there germs in my pet's saliva?

In short, yes. Despite saliva's antibacterial effects, a pet's

mouth harbors billions of bacteria just waiting to infect humans when introduced into open wounds. Within this “bacterial soup” are two organisms with tongue-twisting names and a special ability to cause severe human disease: *Capnocytophaga canimorsus* (capno-sigh-toh-fah-gah canny-morse-us), a long, rod-shaped bug; and *Pasteurella multocida* (par-stew-rella mul-tee-sigh-dar), a tiny oval-shaped bug.

Although I wish these organ-

isms had nicknames, they don't — so I'll just call them *Capnocytophaga* and *Pasteurella* here (recognizing that there are other *Capnocytophaga* and *Pasteurella* species that are not important causes of human disease).

If you own a dog or cat, you probably live with these germs. They're found in most healthy dogs and cats. *Capnocytophaga* inhabits the mouth of more than 70% of dogs and 55% of cats, whereas *Pasteurella* is found in more than 50% of dogs and more than 70% of cats.

Why do doctors worry about these two bugs?

Although rare, *Capnocytophaga* infections are concerning because they progress rapidly, and up to one-third of infections can be fatal. Within just a few days of a lick or bite, *Capnocytophaga* can multiply in your blood and cause critical organs to fail.

These infections are also hard to diagnose because *Capnocytophaga* grows slowly in the laboratory. The most severe form of infection — a gruesome gangrenous skin condition known as purpura fulminans — has a mortality rate of 60%. Survivors often face amputation of fingers, toes or limbs.

Pasteurella infections are more common, because *Pasteurella* is frequently involved in bite wound infections (think of it as the common cat bite bug). Much less often, serious *Pasteurella* infections follow licking, especially in babies or people that allow pets to lick open wounds or medical devices. With increasing animal ownership and advancements in human medical therapy, reports of *Pasteurella* infections of knee and hip replacements, peritoneal dialysis systems and long-term vascular access devices are increasing.

“We have seen serious *Pasteurella* infections that arose after cats — especially kittens — chewed on and contaminated



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dialysis equipment,” says Natasha Tuznik, an infectious-disease physician at the University of California-Davis. “Such equipment should always be kept away from pets.”

How often does licking lead to serious infections?

While bacteria like *Pasteurella* and *Capnocytophaga* are very common in your pet’s saliva, it’s incredibly rare for people to get sick after being licked. Every year, millions of blood-

stream infections occur in North America and Europe, but fewer than 600 *Capnocytophaga* infections and just 20 cases of *purpura fulminans* have ever been reported. Infections from licking are most likely to occur in infants, pregnant people, people over 50, or people with conditions such as AIDS, cancer, alcoholism, diabetes or organ transplants. Tuznik notes that “people who lack a functioning spleen are particularly susceptible to *Capnocytophaga* infections and are specifically advised to avoid

being licked by pets.”

How can I reduce the chance of infection from licking?

Wash your skin with soap and water after being licked. Avoid sharing food dishes and utensils with your pet (no more fork feeding!). Prevent pets from licking open wounds or medical devices. And people in high-risk groups should limit contact to snuggles instead of smooches. If you (or people you care for) have

a weak immune system and illness develops, tell your health care provider about any known animal contact. When doctors know which bacteria to suspect, the result is earlier treatment, faster recovery and fewer complications.

I’m immunocompromised. Should I give up my pet?

No! Remember, pet ownership can ease the emotional burdens often experienced by people with chronic illnesses. Even

if your pet licks you, the chance of infection is minuscule. Talk to your doctor and veterinarian about ways to minimize the risk based on your specific health condition or life stage while keeping dogs and cats by your side.

Jane Sykes is a professor of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California-Davis. She is a board-certified specialist in small animal (dog and cat) internal medicine with a special interest in infectious diseases.

HEALTH

Common medical issues that affect aging pets

Pet owners' devotion to their animals is evidenced in the lengths modern pet parents go to keep their furry friends happy and healthy.

A recent survey from GOBankingRates found that 70% of pet owners spent between \$600 and \$1,200 on their pets in 2023, which underscores how important companion animals are to the people who take care of them.

Millions of pet owners might admit there's no limit to what they would do to protect their pets, but even the most devoted dog owner or cat caregiver recognizes that age can catch up to companion animals.

Much like humans can't stop their own bodies from aging, pet owners have little recourse against Father Time when it comes to caring for their pets.

The American Veterinary Medical Association notes that cats and dogs are living longer now than ever before, so it's good for pet owners to familiarize themselves with common health issues that can affect older pets.

Senior pets

The AVMA notes that cats are generally considered "senior" after 10 years of age. It's a little harder to pinpoint when dogs enter their golden years, as the size disparity between breeds affects their senior status, or lack thereof.

The AVMA notes small or toy breeds (less than 20 pounds) acquire "senior" status between 8-11 years old, medium-sized breeds (20 to 50 pounds) between 8-10, large breeds (50 to 90 pounds) between 8-9, and giant breeds (more than 90 pounds) between 6-7.

Cancer and senior pets

The AVMA reports that cancer is the cause of death in roughly 50% of all dogs and around one-third of senior cats.

Cancer in pets may produce a variety of symptoms, including:

- Abdominal swelling
- Bleeding from the mouth or nose or other body openings
- Difficulty eating or swallowing
- Breathing difficulties
- Lumps, bumps or discolored skin
- Sores that will not heal
- Persistent diarrhea or vomiting
- Decreased appetite or body weight
- Swelling, heat, pain or lameness that cannot be explained

Additional issues affecting aging pets

Though cancer is responsible for a significant percentage of deaths among senior cats and dogs, it's not the only issue that can affect aging pets. The AVMA notes a number of common health problems affect pets as they age, including:

- Heart disease: The Animal Medical Center, a New York-based nonprofit organization, notes de-

generative valve disease, dilated cardiomyopathy and heartworm disease are common types of heart disease in dogs. Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is a common heart disease found in cats.

- Kidney or urinary tract disease: The Veterinary Diagnostic Library at Michigan State University notes that chronic kidney disease affects up to 10% of aging dogs and 35% of aging cats.
- Liver disease
- Diabetes: The AVMA reports

that diabetes is most often diagnosed in dogs between the ages of 7 and 10 and in cats older than 6.

- Joint or bone disease
- Overweight or obesity
- Vision or hearing loss: The AVMA notes senior pets can develop cataracts that affect their vision and may not respond as well to voice commands as they did when they were younger.

— By Metro Editorial Services

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HEALTH

Ask a vet: Anal gland issues are gross and painful. Here's what to do

Q : I have a 3-year-old Great Dane who we rescued a year ago. He's had anal gland issues the whole time, which



Jane Sykes

have worsened in the last six months (spends a lot of time licking). He seems to be in discomfort and distress. We have eliminated chicken and switched to a salmon-based food and have tried anal gland support chews (six per day!), allergy meds, probiotics and canned pumpkin. Not much change. Our vet says to consider surgery to remove his anal glands. Thoughts?

A : The first step is to make sure there's not something else causing the problem. Your vet should take a complete history and perform a thorough examination, including a rectal exam. Does your dog strain to poop? Does he have skin problems, diarrhea or blood in his poop? If he has skin allergies — which are common in dogs with anal gland problems — it's critical to get those under control because they can mimic and lead to anal gland problems (and make them harder to treat). Before resorting to surgery, dogs with recurrent problems should also have their glands flushed by a vet and filled with a steroid/antibiotic (possibly more than once).

What are anal glands, anyway?

Both dogs and cats have anal glands, which are two blueberry-size scent glands that are connected by narrow ducts to the spot where the anus meets surrounding skin. Anal glands are more properly known as anal sacs (but because owners have been known to mishear "sacs" as "sex," I say "glands" when talking to owners to avoid embarrassment!).

The glands sit just inside the



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

anus at the eight o'clock and four o'clock positions. Veterinarians can easily feel them when they do a digital rectal examination in dogs — a practice avoided in a cat not under sedation, because cats have a small anus (and because of the speed with which a cat can inflict severe wounds on anyone who attempts such a procedure).

Each sac contains an exceptionally foul-smelling liquid that is mostly water, but can vary in consistency. As your pet poops, a tiny drop of this fluid is squeezed onto the stools. This could be a means of marking territory, but the true purpose of the anal glands remains a mystery.

What are signs of anal gland problems?

Think of anal gland issues like a plumbing problem. When things are in order, you wouldn't even know that anal glands exist. But when the plumbing gets clogged, the glands become irritated and painful.

A dog with anal gland problems may persistently lick or bite at the area, seem uncomfortable when sitting or pooping, strain to poop, or "scoot" (drag its bottom along the ground). In severe cases, there might be swelling or redness around the anus — sometimes

accompanied by bloody or yellow discharge that can have a repulsive fishy odor.

What causes anal gland problems?

Even though anal gland problems are common — occurring in about 10% of dogs during their lifetimes — they are understudied compared with other diseases. Researchers have proposed several contributing factors, including obesity, constipation, diarrhea and skin allergies. A dog with skin allergies may scoot because its butt itches, which might lead to anal gland problems. A 2021 United Kingdom study of 104,212 dogs found that King Charles spaniels, cockapoos, Shih Tzus, bichon frisés and cocker spaniels were at increased risk when compared with other breeds. Flat-faced breeds — such as French bulldogs and Boston terriers — were more likely to have problems than long-nosed breeds (such as border collies and retrievers). Anal gland problems are rare in cats.

When anal glands don't empty properly, secretions build up and glands become distended.

This is known as anal sac impaction. When the glands get inflamed, the condition is called anal sacculitis, but it's hard to

tell the two conditions apart. When fluid within the glands becomes thick and gritty, it can plug the ducts, worsening the problem. This can then be followed by bacterial infection, where a gland fills with pus and becomes an anal sac abscess. Pain that results from impaction, sacculitis and infection can cause a dog to scoot and lick, which exacerbates the problem.

Anal gland cancer can also occur, but is usually unrelated to these conditions, and dogs with cancer don't typically show signs of scooting and intense irritation. Anal gland cancer is also rare, and mostly affects dogs older than 8 years.

What's the best way to fix anal gland problems?

Skin allergies, parasites (like fleas or tapeworms) and other gastrointestinal problems can cause similar signs, so first make sure that the anal glands are the issue. Make sure your dog is on parasite prevention medication, and you also might try changing your dog's diet. Your vet should do an examination and might use sedation if the area seems tender or your dog is likely to bite. If the area around the anus looks healthy, they might try to clear a blocked duct by gently squeezing the glands.

If your dog is not having problems, leave the glands alone to avoid irritating them.

For dogs with simple impactions and no other obvious underlying problems, supplemental dietary fiber might reduce recurrence by improving stool consistency (provided it doesn't cause constipation). However, good studies are lacking. In a small 2024 European study that examined one specific brand of chew that contained fiber (apple pectin and pumpkin) and a probiotic, dogs given the chew had a lower rate of impaction recurrence than dogs that did not receive the chew (although some still had recurrence). Chews available in North America,

though, have different ingredients, and researchers have not studied them in the same way, so you might be wasting your money. And for some dogs, ingredients in chews can aggravate skin allergies.

For recurrent problems, or if the area is red or swollen and a vet has ruled out other causes, your vet needs to flush the glands and fill them with a topical steroid/antibiotic preparation. Oral antibiotics, which can cause diarrhea and contribute to antibiotic resistance, are needed only for severe infections.

In most dogs that get this treatment, discomfort resolves within a week. Some dogs relapse weeks to months later and require re-treatment; in rare cases, up to six treatments are required. In a Swedish study, relapse occurred in 47% of dogs with skin allergies compared with only 13% of dogs without skin allergies. Treating those allergies — with special diets, desensitization, or prescription medications that modulate the immune system — might reduce the chance of relapse. Consider seeing a veterinary dermatologist.

When is surgery needed?

If your dog continues to have problems despite topical treatment (as do around 1% of dogs with anal gland problems) or has an anal gland abscess, a vet can surgically remove the glands, a procedure called anal saccullectomy.

But this surgery has a high rate of complications, including infection, incontinence and failure to heal, so it should be performed only when conservative approaches fail. Ask about referral to a board-certified veterinary surgeon.

Jane Sykes is a professor of veterinary medicine at the University of California-Davis. She is a board-certified specialist in small animal (dog and cat) internal medicine with a special interest in infectious diseases.

HEALTH

Living with cats or dogs may lower children's risk of food allergies

By Dan Hurley*Special to The Washington Post*

Newborns who live in a home with cats or dogs appear to be less likely to develop food allergies, according to the findings of a large study. The benefit holds even if the exposure is during fetal development, when a pregnant mother lives with pets.

The effect in the study was modest but statistically significant: Exposure to dogs or cats during fetal development or the first few months of life lowered the odds of a later food allergy by about 14%. The benefit was strongest when the dogs were kept indoors and when the exposure was during both fetal development and infancy.

Earlier studies reached similar conclusions, but the new study from Japan, involving more than 65,000 infants and their parents, is by far the largest to date. Like other studies, this one could not prove that pets themselves lower the risk of a food allergy. It could be that something else associated with pet ownership, such as lifestyle or genetics, could be causing the apparent association.

But pediatricians who specialize in the study and treatment of allergies said the results look reassuring for pet owners.

"The finding that exposure to dogs and cats is related to less food allergy seems pretty solid and agrees with several prior studies," said James Gern, professor and chief of the Division of Allergy, Immunology and Rheumatology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Gern, who published a paper in 2004 showing that dog ownership reduces the risk of all kinds of allergies, said the new study "adds to the growing literature that contacts with pets could have many health benefits for children. In addition to food allergy, other studies have found lower rates of atopic dermatitis, wheezing illnesses, respiratory allergies, asthma and increased psychological well-being."

The new study, published in the open-access journal PLoS ONE,



was led by Hisao Okabe of the department of pediatrics at the Fukushima Medical University. She and colleagues analyzed data for the Japan Environment and Children's Study, a nationwide study of all pregnancies between January 2011 and March 2014. Information was obtained from medical records and self-administered questionnaires. The researchers examined children's risk of developing food allergies up to age 3.

Okabe and colleagues checked pet ownership's link to food allergies overall, as well as to a variety of specific food allergies. Dog ownership, they found, reduced the risk of egg, milk and nut allergies, while cat ownership re-

duced the risk of egg, wheat and soybean allergies.

The study also looked at possible effects from other pets. No significant association was seen between food allergies and exposure to turtles, hamsters or birds. But when the link was limited to nut allergies only, hamster ownership actually increased the risk by 93%. So few families kept hamsters, however, that the apparent association could be a statistical fluke.

The lowered risk of developing food allergies due to living with dogs was far less in the present study than in a paper published in 2019. That study, which directly tested young children for food al-

lergies rather than relying on parents' questionnaires, found that living with dogs reduced the odds of developing a food allergy by an extraordinary 90%. And the more dogs the better: None of the infants who lived with at least two dogs developed a food allergy.

The senior author of that study, Tom Marrs, director of the Allergy Academy at King's College London, said that while only about 7% of children in the United Kingdom have a food allergy confirmed by testing, up to a quarter of parents say that their kids have such an allergy. The study out of Japan would have benefited by directly testing the young children with food challenges, he said.

Another limitation of the study, Marrs said, is that it can't prove that the pets themselves, rather than something about the pet owners, are the true cause of the lowered odds of food allergies.

"Families with a strong family history of allergy are likely to have parents with pet-dander allergies," Marrs said. "This makes it less likely that they will get pets for their children. So the inverse relationship between pets and allergies may be owing to the allergic parents not wanting to react to pets themselves."

The only way to prove that pet ownership reduces the risk of food allergies, he said, is with a randomized controlled trial, in which pregnant women agree to be randomly assigned to either have a pet or not. But, he said, it would be difficult to find people willing to participate in such a study.

Amanda Cox, a professor of pediatrics at the Jaffe Food Allergy Institute in the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York, said parents routinely ask her whether pets raise or lower their children's risk of developing allergies. "I definitely would say it's been a murky area, but this study looks fairly convincing," she said of the Japan study.

A review published of all the proven ways to reduce the development of allergic disease included breastfeeding exclusively for the first four to six months af-

ter birth; avoiding cows' milk during the first days of life; introducing peanuts in an age-appropriate manner if the family usually eats them; and growing up on a farm (due to exposure to a greater diversity of microbes). That same review cautioned that when parents or siblings have allergies, or when the child already has atopic dermatitis, families should avoid acquiring a cat.

"If I see a kid who has significant eczema, and I know they have a cat or dog in the house, I might have them tested for being allergic to those pets," Cox said.

Because the study out of Japan was undertaken well before the COVID-19 pandemic, Cox said, "I would be interested in knowing whether spending more time inside with pets during the pandemic increased the effect on children's allergies."

The large size of the study could have actually led the investigators to find apparent spurious statistical links when drilling down to particular types of food allergies, Gern said.

"The authors may be overinterpreting the relationship between pets and specific food allergies like milk or wheat," Gern said. "They performed numerous comparisons, increasing the possibility that some random associations will be deemed significant."

"I would also not put much stock in the hamster data," he added. "There were not many hamster owners and they only saw one association, with nut allergies."

Overall, however, the findings on the benefits of living with pets fits well with many previous studies, he said.

"The benefits of exposure to animals have been demonstrated in several different contexts," Gern said in an email, "such as with pets (like this study), farm animals (Central Europe, Amish, and Wisconsin dairy farms), and even pests (mice and cockroaches) in disadvantaged inner city homes. Perhaps the overall message is that a biodiverse environment promotes immune development and healthy children."

HEALTH

How to host guests who are allergic to your cats

By Rachel Kurzius

The Washington Post

Cats live in 26% of American households, and they're also the source of one of the most common indoor allergies. You can see the conflict that might emerge from this duality, especially during the holidays, when hosting reaches its peak.

We asked allergists what people with cats can do to make their homes more accommodating to those plagued with feline allergies, and also what allergic guests can do to prepare for a visit. One thing both parties should do: Communicate with each other in advance, so everyone can properly plan and assess the risk.

And hosts in particular should know: You can't pick and choose which of the following measures you'd like to take. "It's an all-or-nothing thing," says Tania Elliott, chief medical officer at Nectar Allergy Center in New York City.

WHAT HOSTS WITH CATS CAN DO

1. Just removing the cat isn't enough

Bringing your cat over to a neighbor's house minutes before the party starts isn't sufficient preparation for an allergic guest.

"Even if you remove the pet from the home, that allergen in particular is incredibly potent and can stay suspended in the air for up to four months," says Elliott. To reduce the amount of allergen in your home and decrease your guest's chances of a flare-up, you'll have to do some cleaning.

Once your cat is out of the house or confined to a room that will be off-limits to your guests, dust thoroughly, then vacuum with a HEPA vacuum, which will pick up smaller particles that regular vacuums miss. You'll want to take care of these chores hours before your guests arrive, at the very least, "because once you start vacuuming, you're aerosolizing some of that cat allergen out of the carpet, out of the floor," says James Haden, allergist and immunologist with Haden Allergy in Fort Worth. So, you'll want to give your air filters a chance to clean those particles out of the air.

If your guests are staying overnight, be sure to ban your cats from the room they'll be using a few days before the visit. You'll also need to launder the linens and



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blankets. "That way, you're not sleeping in something you're allergic to for eight hours," Haden says.

2. Filter and circulate the air

The most important thing you can do is remove the allergens from the air your guests will breathe inside your home. The best way to do that is with air purifiers, ideally ones with HEPA filters — yes, HEPA again, which stands for "high efficiency particulate air." Make sure the air purifier, also known as an air cleaner, is properly sized for the space. Products will say how many square feet they cover, and you ought to place one in each room where you plan on hosting guests.

"It's not a bad idea to have those HEPA filters in the room where you're going to be and have those running in advance of people coming over," says Haden.

Make sure your HVAC's air filters and vents are fresh and clean so they're working at full capacity, too. One mistake people make is turning on their heat for the first time all season when guests show up. "Allergens can get stuck in the heating filters," says Elliott. "You turn on the heat on the first cold day or you have a snowy day, and then all of a sudden that can pollute the air." Avoid this by "making sure you have your filtration system

running a few days in advance and circulating that air," she says.

If the weather allows, keeping your windows open certainly won't hurt, either.

3. Wipe down your cat

Your cat might not love this one, but "washing the pet has been shown to reduce the amount of allergens," says Elliott. If your feline won't submit to an actual bath, you can use hypoallergenic wipes.

Haden also suggests brushing your cat to get rid of some dander, though he warns that "you want to make sure you're doing it in a place where the guests won't be anytime soon."

4. Move the litter box

There are a lot of variations when it comes to cat allergies. Many people are allergic to the animal's dander. But others are allergic to its saliva or urine. If your guests are sensitive to the urine or to the dust from some forms of cat litter, you'll want to move the litter box accordingly. Choose a spot where your guests won't have to encounter it; all the better, says Haden, if the location is well ventilated.

5. Keep allergy medications on hand

Stock some common antihistamines in case your guest doesn't bring their own and feels the impact of your cats. Make sure the medication is non-sedating (skip the Benadryl) and that it kicks in quickly. Elliott recommends cetirizine, also known as Zyrtec. Nasal sprays with azelastine can work for both nose and eye symptoms, and Pataday eyedrops can help with itch, she adds. You might even consider having an EpiPen in the house, especially if one of your guests has asthma.

WHAT GUESTS WITH ALLERGIES CAN DO

1. Take medication well before the event

A person who is "super, super allergic may want to choose to go somewhere else," says Elliott, though with the help of medication, most people can handle the risk "as long as the cat is not in (their) face."

A guest's preparation for a feline-filled home should begin days before the gath-

ering. "The most important thing is to pre-medicate," so the medication can build up in your system, says Haden. "All allergy medicines work better to prevent a reaction than they do to stop a reaction once it's there."

That's because allergic reactions have a cascading effect, he explains. The reaction leads to even more symptoms because it releases chemicals that cause the release of even more chemicals. The bottom line: Don't wait until you start to sneeze or your eyes start to itch to take allergy meds.

Begin taking your oral antihistamine, your allergy nasal spray and your allergy eyedrops up to a week before your planned arrival and continue that routine during the duration of your stay. "People will still have some symptoms, but you can mitigate it and make it more manageable," he says.

Elliott also suggests that people, especially older guests, make sure they're up to date on their flu shot and otherwise in good health for the visit. "If you're sick and you're already congested, or maybe you have a virus and your asthma is already acting up, then something like a cat allergy can set you over the edge."

For a longer-term solution, consider talking to your doctor about immunotherapy. "One of the most common reasons that people start on allergy shots is because they want to keep a cat or be around somebody who has a cat," says Haden. "It's a potent allergen, and it's a potent motivator of people's decision-making."

2. Bring your inhaler if you have asthma

While asthma and allergies are not interchangeable, about 4 out of every 5 people who have asthma have an allergic trigger, says Elliott. That means their asthma gets worse when exposed to an allergen like cat dander, which could lead to an asthma attack.

"Cat-induced asthma attacks can be kind of dramatic," says Haden — so if you have asthma, you should be extremely cautious about visiting feline-friendly households.

In addition to taking your medicine that day and in the days prior, Elliott stresses that you need to bring your inhaler along for the visit. You might even want to use it 15 minutes before entering a home with cats as a preventive measure.

HEALTH

Ask a vet: Can a special diet help my cat avoid urinary problems?

Q: I plan to adopt a couple of kittens/young cats in a few months. I want them on a diet that is least likely to cause urinary crystal formation because my current cats are suffering. What can I do to prevent issues?

A: On their own, crystals — which can be seen only under a microscope — are not always cause for concern. However, in some cats, they can aggregate into stones or jellylike plugs that block the flow of urine, a deadly situation. To prevent these problems, hydration is key — you're doing all the right things!

You can also lower the risk of urinary problems by reducing stress, ensuring access to clean litter and managing obesity. Special diets for urinary health are best reserved for cats with known problems.

What causes urination problems in cats?

Cats have urination problems like house-soiling and straining in the litter box because of behavioral problems or a variety of diseases of the urinary tract itself. Before you spend a lot of money on treatment and prevention, it's important to first understand what's behind your cat's problem.

- **Behavioral problems:** If you have a male cat that deliberately pees on walls or other vertical surfaces, it's more likely to be a behavioral problem. Behavioral problems are often triggered by stress over the presence of dogs or an inadequate litter box setup. Special diets and medications for diseases of the urinary tract won't do anything for behavioral problems; they might even create more stress for your cat and cause issues like diarrhea.

- **Urinary tract diseases:** Straining to pee without producing a good stream (sometimes while vocalizing), peeing tiny amounts more often than normal,



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or having blood in the pee are all signs that your cat may have a urinary tract disease.

These include kidney or bladder stones, bladder inflammation (cystitis), urinary tract infections, bladder cancer and even foreign material (I once treated a cat that couldn't pee because of obstruction by a BB pellet).

One of the most common urinary diseases in cats is cystitis, with or without blood clots, stones or jellylike plugs that can block the flow of urine.

Cystitis tends to occur in young adult, male, overweight and indoor-

only cats; it can also be exacerbated by stress. Unlike in dogs, young adult cats with cystitis rarely have urinary tract infections, so antibiotics don't help.

What's all the fuss about crystals?

When cats don't consume a lot of water, their urine becomes concentrated and supersaturated with certain substances, most commonly struvite and calcium oxalate.

These substances can then form crystals (similar to making crystals from

rock candy). Initially, the crystals themselves can be seen only under a microscope, and they aren't painful — so crystals alone aren't a sign of disease. But if the process continues, crystals can be building blocks for the formation of stones and plugs.

Plugs, basically a cat thing, begin when crystals, tissue debris and blood form a sludge in the bladder.

When a cat tries to pee, this sludge forms a plug that can block the urethra (the tube that connects the bladder to the outside world). Think of a plug like partially set Jell-O with tiny pieces of



fruit (the crystals and debris) in it.

Plugs are most likely to be a problem in male cats because of the shape and narrow diameter of the male urethra.

Why are stones and plugs bad?

Like a plug, stones that form in the bladder can block the urethra. Cats with stones or plugs in their urethra strain in the litter box, and their bladder becomes distended with urine — a life-threatening condition.

If your cat is straining to pee and no urine is coming out, take them to an emergency clinic immediately.

A delay of just a few hours here can be the difference between life and death.

Stones that form in the kidneys are more insidious. If these pass, they can easily

block one of the ureters (tubes connecting each kidney to the bladder) because a cat's ureter is only twice the diameter of a human hair.

Fluid back pressure from the obstruction can cause permanent kidney damage. But because cats need only one normal kidney — and because cats are good at hiding signs of pain — if the other kidney is healthy, you could be completely oblivious to such a serious event.

Conversely, if the other kidney is diseased (usually because of a previous stone), obstruction of the ureter results in obvious illness, like not eating and vomiting — because now both kidneys are not working.

Some of these cats can be helped with medical therapy (intravenous fluids and medications), but most need urinary bypass surgery. This surgery is

risky and best performed by a board-certified veterinary surgeon that has plenty of experience with the procedure. The cost for surgery with ongoing care often exceeds \$10,000.

Can diets prevent these problems?

The “ideal” diet for cat urinary health should prevent stones and plugs — not necessarily crystals — because stones and plugs irritate the urinary tract and obstruct urine flow.

Because stones and plugs that block the urethra often contain struvite, many nonprescription diets marketed for feline “urinary health” are designed to reduce urine pH, magnesium and phosphorus levels — conditions that predispose to struvite disorders.

But it's not that simple.

More than 90% of kidney stones contain calcium oxalate, and in some cats, diets that prevent struvite stones and plugs can predispose them to kidney stones, which might be worse.

Because the wrong diet can have unintended consequences, special diets are best prescribed for cats with a known problem.

Regardless of the problem, hydration is a key component of any management plan, says Jodi Westropp, a professor at the University of California at Davis with a special interest in feline lower urinary tract diseases.

Ultimately, the best way to prevent urinary problems from happening in the first place is to promote water intake and minimize conditions that predispose cats to cystitis, such as obesity and a sedentary indoor

lifestyle.

Because cats with an outdoor lifestyle can harm wildlife and are prone to other diseases, consider a “catio” (enclosed outdoor patio for cats — try a catio tour).

And you can encourage your cat to drink more water by feeding it a canned diet, providing a drinking fountain, replacing water daily and placing different types of water bowls around the house in low foot-traffic areas. (Although my cat Freckles likes to drink out of the dog's water bowl, perhaps to taunt him!)

Jane Sykes is a professor of veterinary medicine at the University of California-Davis. She is a board-certified specialist in small animal (dog and cat) internal medicine with a special interest in infectious diseases.

HEALTH

Ask a vet: Why are my cat's pupils dilated all the time?

Q : My elderly cat's pupils seem to stay dilated, even in bright light. Why?

A : In old cats, dilated pupils are often just a sign of a harmless condition called iris atrophy. However, if your cat has dilated pupils and seems sleepy, is not walking normally, stops eating or bumps into things, you should call your veterinarian immediately, or take your cat to an emergency clinic. These signs can indicate serious underlying diseases that need immediate treatment. And if your cat is squinting or appears visually impaired — or if their eyes appear cloudy or red — talk to your veterinarian about whether your cat could benefit from seeing a board-certified veterinary ophthalmologist.



Jane Sykes

How do cats' eyes work?

Just like in humans, a cat's pupil is the black hole in the center of the colored part of the eye (the iris). The pupil narrows and widens to regulate the amount of light that the eye takes in, optimizing image perception. One tiny sphincter muscle encircles the pupil and acts like the drawstring of a bag to narrow the pupil in response to strong light.

Another muscle dilates the pupil when it's dark.

Enlargement of the pupil is a critical component of the fight-or-flight response. When an animal is being pursued by a predator, visual acuity can mean the difference between life and death, so the pupils dilate. The fight-or-flight response also happens when cats are tracking prey. If you've ever watched a cat just before it pounces, you've seen its pupils enlarge in anticipation of its catch. And cats experiencing the terror of transport to a veterinarian often have pupils as big as dinner plates.



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Why do pupils get wider with age?

But big pupils don't always mean fear or excitement. With age, the part of the iris that surrounds the pupil can become frayed, so its edges take on a scalloped appearance (we refer to this as iris atrophy).

Age-related degeneration of the sphincter muscle also weakens the pupil's ability to constrict. Sometimes the entire iris thins and looks like a fine lace veil. When that happens, light reflected by the iridescent part of the retina (the tapetum lucidum) filters back through the iris, creating a "stained-glass window" effect.

Iris atrophy usually does not impair sight, but it can increase sensitivity to light. "Iris atrophy is usually a happenstance find-

ing in senior cats that we examine for other problems — and almost every senior dog has some degree of iris atrophy," says Sara Thomasy, a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Ophthalmology and professor of surgical and radiological sciences at the University of California at Davis. (Senior has been defined as more than 10 years of age for cats and the last 25% of life for dogs).

What are some concerning causes of pupil dilation?

While pupil dilation may be no cause for worry, it can also be a sign of serious illness. Extensive damage to the retina or the optic nerve leads to blindness and failure of the pupils to narrow in response to light. That damage can be caused by cer-

tain infections, very high blood pressure, some medications, a dietary deficiency of the amino acid taurine, inherited diseases that cause the retina to degenerate and glaucoma.

Glaucoma, which has many causes, refers to increased pressure within the eyeball. The rise in pressure first damages the iris sphincter muscle, then the injury extends to the retina, leading to blindness and dilated pupils. According to Thomasy, glaucoma in cats most often results from inflammation in the eye, or uveitis. Although uveitis can cause the eye to appear cloudy, "often dilated pupils is the only sign of glaucoma in cats," she added.

Thomasy also described rare reports of blindness with pupil dilation in cats that underwent lengthy dental procedures

under anesthesia, including a 2025 case report from the UK. In these cats, having their jaws held open for a long time (using spring-loaded instruments) cut off blood flow to the retina, causing the retinal cells to die. To prevent this, veterinarians have been advised to avoid prolonged jaw opening during surgical procedures in cats.

Dilated pupils may also result from brain damage, which is usually accompanied by other signs of brain disease, such as unresponsiveness or seizures. Infections, certain cancers, head trauma, toxins such as snail bait and dietary deficiency of thiamine (vitamin B1) may also cause brain disease with pupil dilation.

What should I do if I am worried about my cat's eyes?

If your cat is less interactive, not walking properly, eating less or bumping into things, see your veterinarian as soon as possible to rule out more serious problems of the eye and brain. Go to an emergency clinic if it is after hours or you can't get a routine appointment within 24 hours. Veterinarians can do a neurological examination to assess the function of the brain and the nerves that control pupil size. They can also use special instruments that illuminate and magnify each part of your cat's eye to distinguish among causes for dilated pupils. In some cases, referral to a board-certified veterinary ophthalmologist might be needed. But there's no such cause for such concern if your cat is behaving normally, especially if the iris just looks a little ragged around the edges.

Jane Sykes is a professor of veterinary medicine at the University of California-Davis. She is a board-certified specialist in small animal (dog and cat) internal medicine with a special interest in infectious diseases.

HEALTH

In stressful times, our anxiety can rub off on pets. Causes and cures for pet anxiety

By Cedar Burnett

The Associated Press

In this age of heightened anxiety, many of us turn to our pets for emotional support. But is our behavior increasing our furry friends' fears?

The answer isn't simple, says Frankie Jackson, a veterinary nurse and animal behavior consultant, and the owner of Canine Counseling in Smyrna, Georgia. She said she's seen an increase in anxiety among her animal and human clients, but that it's hard to unwind the cause and effect.

"Dogs are incredibly responsive to our expressions, our body language and our scent," she says. "There is a feedback loop — the owners are nervous; the dog gets nervous. Our cortisol levels rise and fall in tandem."

Dr. Becky Peters, a veterinarian and owner of Bath Veterinary Hospital in Bath, New York, has also noticed a link between the anxiety of pets and their owners, particularly in the exam room.

"If owners try to over comfort them — lots of 'you're OK!' in anxious voices, the animals do get more anxious. If we stay calm and quiet, they do too," Peters says.

Peters attributes much of the rise in pet anxiety to the social upheaval of the COVID years. Many animals who were acquired during the pandemic had limited opportunities to socialize with other people and pets during their peak developmental stages. After COVID, pets who were used to having their family at home experienced separation anxiety as their owners returned to work and school.

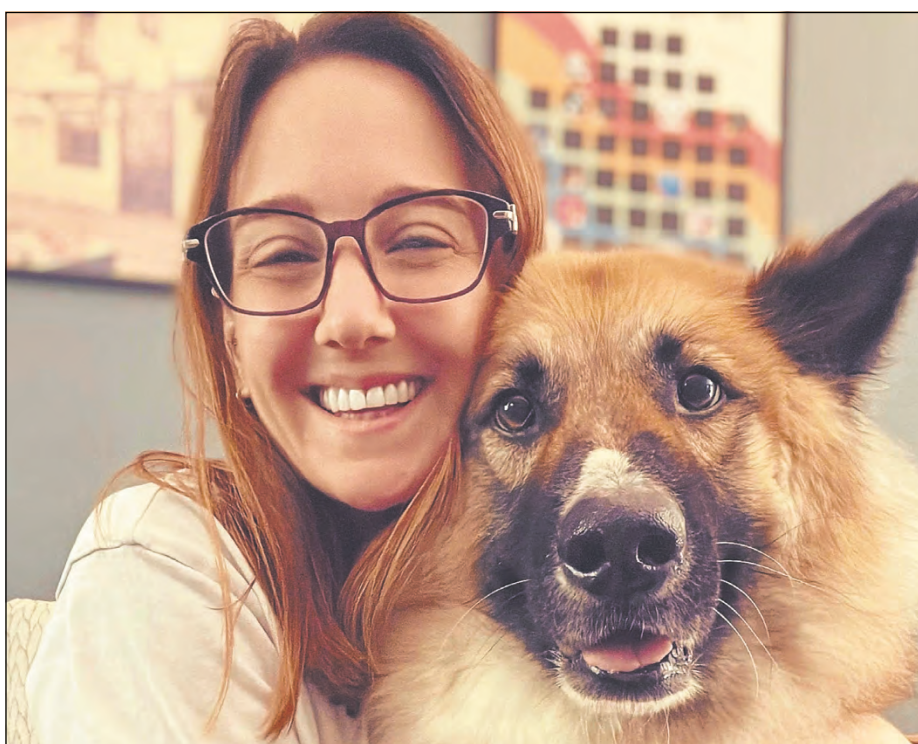
"A lot of pet anxiety comes from changes to their households," Peters says. "It can also occur from a lack of routine and structure and not enough physical activity."

Other components that could contribute to our pets' anxiety include unmet needs, past trauma and insufficient open spaces.

"We are asking our dogs to live in a world that isn't made for them," she says.

Try to get at the cause of your pet's anxiety

Low-level stress responses in dogs, such as eating less and excessive self-grooming, are forms of communication that precede lunging and barking, Jackson says. Trying to solve reactive behaviors through obedi-



FRANKIE JACKSON — THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

This undated photo released by Frankie Jackson, a UK-registered veterinary nurse and certified animal behavior consultant, shows Jackson with her dog, Rook, at her home in Smyrna, Ga.

ence training without addressing the root cause can make dogs' anxiety worse.

"It's important to understand what the dogs are saying and why they're behaving the way they are. Manners and life skills are important, but it won't create happy dogs," Jackson says.

Anxiety in cats can be harder to spot, according to Jackson, because they're hardwired to hide it. While dogs seek out their support people, cats don't feel safe expressing their vulnerability. Urinating in the house, scratching, hiding under the bed and overgrooming can be signs that your kitty is anxious.

First, see a vet

If your animal companion is suddenly acting out or on a licking binge, Jackson advises seeing a veterinarian to rule out a medical cause, such as pain or allergies.

Veterinarians can also prescribe anti-anxiety medication and complementary treat-

ments to promote sleep and relaxation. Peters recommends supplements for her canine clients including probiotics and the amino acids L-theanine and tryptophan (yes, the turkey coma one).

For cats, she suggests using a product like Feliway that diffuses calming pheromones into the air.

Learn about the breed

A dog's breed might also play a part in developing anxiety. Peters says that while every dog is different, the more active herding and working breeds like shepherds and border collies can become anxious and destructive without an outlet for their energy.

"Herding breeds need space to run and jobs to do," she says.

When Tacoma, Washington, resident Shelani Vanniasinkam got her Australian shepherd puppy, Roo, she didn't know about the breed's reputation for anxiety. Her previous dog had been an easygoing husky who

enjoyed pats from strangers and visits to the dog park. She quickly realized Roo was not that type of dog.

"He had a lot more needs than we anticipated," Vanniasinkam says. "We couldn't leave him alone for more than 30 minutes."

Vanniasinkam and her husband, Jesus Celaya, reached out to a local pet behaviorist, but it became clear that Roo's anxiety was so acute he needed medication before he could start behavior training.

Should you consider meds for an anxious pet?

Medication can be important in behavioral treatment, but it shouldn't be the only approach, says Peters. She usually suggests that her clients try training and routine modification first, unless their pet is causing harm to themselves or others.

"If I'm going to use meds, it's part of a greater process," Peters says.

Roo's veterinarian put him on Fluoxetine, or "doggie Prozac," an antidepressant commonly given to anxious pets. He also prescribed Trazodone, another antidepressant, for particularly stressful events, such as trips to the vet or a night of fireworks.

After starting his medication, Roo received eight months of behavior training, during which Vanniasinkam and her husband not only changed their own approach to dog parenting but also set boundaries with friends and family. They limited Roo's interaction with other dogs, asked people to stop using their doorbell and requested that others ignore Roo when he barks.

Now, when they want to take Roo for off-leash play, they book time at a local Sniffspot, which Vanniasinkam describes as "an Airbnb for anxious and reactive dogs." The company, which launched in 2016, allows homeowners to rent out their yards or property by the hour for solo, off-leash play or doggie playdates.

"It's sad when you can't take your dog to a dog park," Vanniasinkam says. "So, this option is really nice."

She says that while it was initially difficult to navigate Roo's anxiety, he is loving, family-oriented and worth the effort.

"It's hard having an anxious dog, but you can figure it out," she says. "It's just important to understand your dog, so you're set up for success."

HEALTH

Ask a vet: How do I know when it's time to say goodbye to my pet?

Q: How do I know when it is time to say goodbye to a pet?

A: Choosing when to let go is one of the most difficult decisions pet owners face. The timing differs for every owner-animal relationship, depending on your pet's medical condition, the strength of your bond, your resources for caring for them at home, and your access to veterinary care. Ultimately the decision is yours, but your veterinarian, trusted friends and family, and licensed mental health professionals can help.

A senior veterinary student recently came to me for advice on this topic. "What do you do when an owner wants to pursue treatment for a terminal disease, but their pet is visibly suffering," she asked. I told her I provide the range of care options available — and for each one, I give information on cost, invasiveness and likely outcome. Then we discuss what the owner finds acceptable.

If they are struggling, I tell them what I would do if their pet was my pet, knowing everything that I know about that pet's medical condition. But I also explain that I am not them. I have a different lifestyle, different financial resources, a different ability to care for my pet at home and a different pet. And I don't know their pet as well as they do.

Some owners are prepared to pay thousands of dollars for palliative care (treatments that relieve signs of illness instead of curing the underlying problem) if it means they can be with their pet for one more month. Others are adamant that they don't want to prolong their pet's suffering, and they elect euthanasia. Neither approach is wrong, and you should never feel guilty about the path you choose.

"One of the most common concerns we hear from owners is that they might be making a euthanasia decision too soon," says Emily McCobb, pro-

fessor and endowed chair in Accessible Veterinary Care at the University of California at Davis. "I always tell people that I have worked with many owners who regret their animals' last days, but rarely do owners regret making the decision when they did. Being able to end suffering and ensure a peaceful passing is a gift for our beloved animal companions."

How do I know if my pet is suffering?

Consider keeping a daily checklist of whether your pet is doing the things they like to do, as well as any signs of illness (like vomiting, not eating, bumping into walls). When bad days start to outweigh the good days, it could be time to think about euthanasia.

A diary and short videos that show your pet's signs at home can help your veterinarian advise you. Ohio State University's Honoring the Bond program, which is available online, also offers suggestions on how to track your pet's quality of life.

Sometimes it can be hard to tell if a pet is suffering because the signs vary by animal and depend on the underlying disease. Cats are known for hiding signs of illness until disease is very advanced, whereas some nervous dog breeds — like chihuahuas and Siberian huskies — yelp like they are in pain even when they're healthy. A 2023 study from North Carolina State University and Duke University suggested that these breed differences might relate to behavior, rather than true differences in pain perception. And just because your pet can't walk doesn't mean it is in pain. Dogs like dachshunds that experience slipped disks might not have any pain in their back legs, and they can live happily when fitted to a cart with wheels.

If your pet has a progressive condition that is not responding to treatment, or if you cannot afford care, some signs that it might be time to let go include not eating, not drinking,

persistent vomiting, not walking and not interacting with you like they normally do. These signs are especially concerning if they continue for three or more consecutive days.

How can I support my pet at home?

In recent years, several new prescription medications have become available to help relieve pain, itching, vomiting, decreased appetite and other signs (in animals, we say "signs" instead of "symptoms" because symptoms are feelings that a patient describes and animals can't tell us what they are feeling).

These medications can make pets more comfortable, but they do not reverse the underlying illness, which could worsen if it's not diagnosed and specifically treated. That can create an even greater cost to you (and more suffering for your pet).

Don't give your pet over-the-counter human medications unless a veterinarian specifically instructs you to do so. Ibuprofen, acetaminophen and other products can be toxic for dogs and cats and can cause serious conditions like liver and kidney failure.

If you have the time, ability and financial resources to provide a greater level of care at home, options include feeding tubes, injectable fluids and medications, nebulization, physical therapy and even oxygen therapy.

Finally, you can choose in-home hospice care for your pet, if it's available in your area.

The services are performed by interdisciplinary teams that provide care for both pets and their caregivers. Kady Gjessing, a veterinarian, leads the Omega Transitional Care Service at North Carolina State University and is certified by the Companion Animal Euthanasia Training Academy.

"For pets, we can improve quality of life by addressing not only pain, but also mobility, comfort and nutrition," she says. "We help owners make their pet's last days the best they can be —

be it through home cooking, massages or the least stressful ways to administer medications."

Hospice care teams also provide spiritual and emotional support and can connect owners with appropriately trained mental health professionals. According to McCobb, for some pets, in-home hospice services can even reduce costs of care and support a pet's welfare by keeping pets out of the hospital when they're dying.

A directory of animal in-home hospice care and euthanasia providers can be found on the International Association for Animal Hospice and Palliative Care website.

What if I know my pet is suffering but I just can't let go?

You are not alone in struggling with this incredibly difficult decision. It's always hard to say goodbye. Perhaps you are unwilling to consider euthanasia for religious or personal reasons. Perhaps you don't know what to expect. Don't be afraid to ask your veterinarian about the process.

Some veterinary clinics — including the Argus Institute at Colorado State University — offer counseling services to help owners with anticipatory grief ahead of a pet's death. If that's not available in your area, consider seeking help from a clinically trained, licensed mental health professional. If you grant permission, your veterinarian might be willing to talk with them to help them understand your situation.

Regardless of the path you choose, you should never regret the decision to perform euthanasia to relieve your pet's suffering. And remember, you are the best person to decide when the time is right.

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