

COMPANION ANIMALS

WHO ARE THEY?

Animals who live with people primarily for companionship, rather than for food, sport, or work, are called "companion animals" (or "pets").

Many species of animals were domesticated for work or food, and some of them became companions. Dogs, who are descended from Asiatic wolves, were domesticated at least 15,000 years ago. Cats were domesticated at least 9,500 years ago. Horses were domesticated about 6,000 years ago. Most horses are still used for sport or work, but some are companions. Some species of rabbits were originally domesticated during the eleventh century for food, fur, and wool, but by the late nineteenth century, people were living with them as companions. Specific species of small mammals, such as ferrets or guinea pigs, or of birds, such as canaries, are considered to be domesticated.

The distinction between "wild" and "domesticated" animals is not always clear, nor is the definition of "exotic" animals. "Exotic" is often applied to animals kept as companions who are not members of domesticated species—even though the individual animal might be tame—and who are relatively rare as companions. Exotics usually include, for example, some snakes and parrots, monkeys or other nonhuman primates, chinchillas, and sugar gliders. The term is sometimes applied to any companion animal other than a dog or cat.

OVERPOPULATION

Everywhere in the world, there are more animals born than there are homes to care for them. In the United States alone, several million homeless dogs and cats are euthanized every year, and millions more live in cages in shelters, waiting to be adopted. Many are abandoned on highways or in alleys, or are drowned. Spaying and neutering our companion animals will help reduce the overpopulation problem, as will adopting dogs or cats from a shelter, rather than from a breeder or pet shop.

WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?

Wild animals may be captured and sold by a dealer or pet store, and domesticated animals can be bred and sold by their breeder or by a pet store. Animals can also be adopted from a shelter or rescue group.

Captured in the wild and sold by dealers or pet stores

Many "exotic" species of animals are captured in the wild to be sold. Their offspring may be bred locally. The trade in wild-caught native or imported wildlife has seriously threatened the existence of many species in their natural environment. Many animals suffer and die while being captured or during transportation and confinement. Life in captivity for these animals is vastly different from their life in the wild. Some of this trade is legal, but illegal trafficking in wildlife is a multibillion-dollar industry, second in value only to drug smuggling, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

Bred and sold by breeders or by pet stores

Purebred dogs and cats are bred and sold by small breeding establishments, or they are bred in puppy/kitten mills (enterprises that mass produce purebred puppies and kittens) and then sold by

pet stores or even on the Internet. Some breeding facilities mass produce rabbits and other small mammals, birds, fish, or reptiles. Pet stores sell these animals in addition to dogs and cats.

Adopted from shelters and rescue groups

Every kind of companion animal can be found for adoption in a shelter, from purebred dogs and cats to rabbits, turtles, and even fish. Adoptable dogs and cats make up the great majority of the shelter population. Because there is not enough space for all, most of these dogs and cats will be euthanized unless they are adopted. Rescue groups have breed-specific purebred and nearly purebred rescued dogs and cats for adoption.

With few exceptions, most birds, hamsters, snakes, fish, and the other captive species spend most or all of their lives confined in cages, pens, or tanks. No living being should have to endure life in such conditions for the pleasure of others. Purchasing these animals encourages a market for them because profit-seekers will always find a way to meet a demand.

WHAT ARE THEIR NEEDS?

All species are living beings with feelings and individual needs. Animals are not toys, possessions, holiday gifts, or fashion accessories. Many people think of fish in bowls or tanks, for example, as decorations for their home or office, but fish are intelligent animals who have a complex language and social network. (See Fact Sheet: Fishing and Marine Issues.) To reinforce the concept that animals are not property, at least two cities in the U.S. have passed laws stating that people who have companion animals are their "guardians," not their "owners."

Companion animals are dependent upon their human guardians for water, food, and social contact, but in a world where the needs of humans are not always met, the needs of animals are very often overlooked. Too many die of neglect or abuse after a lifetime of suffering.

Although most companion animals can no longer survive on their own, they retain some of their original instincts, drives, and desires. For example, they may long to roam and explore a large area, but they may be confined to an aquarium, cage, or crate, or be tethered on a chain. When companion animals' basic needs are not met, they may become restless, aggressive, or depressed, which can lead to problems in their living situation. Expressing themselves in a loud voice (such as barking) may be natural to them, but their sounds might upset their guardians or the neighbors, and the result could be that the animals are abused, abandoned, or even killed.

Some people consider the relationship between human caregivers and companion animals to be unnatural, as it does not allow animals the freedom to make choices they might make if they were living in what was once their natural habitat. It also perpetuates a dependence that does not allow the animal to grow and develop as they would if they were on their own in the wild, facing the everyday challenges of survival. However, because humans have created this dependence, it is our ethical responsibility to care for the animals already born and not to breed more of them.

THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

When humans act responsibly and are caring toward animals, both benefit. Animals are guaranteed nutritious food and fresh water daily, shelter from the weather and other animals, veterinary care, exercise, companionship, and love, and as much freedom as possible without endangering them. For humans, animals are a source of happiness, play, laughter, affection, and conversation.

People who have dogs as companions walk twice as long, and they say their dogs open up opportunities for socializing. Those who live without other people report feeling less lonely if they

live with a companion animal. Animals help the elderly cope with the sense of isolation and the changes and transitions that occur in later years. Correctional facilities that allow inmates to interact with animals report significant therapeutic effects. These interactions may be the first time the inmates felt they had someone to care for who also cared about them.

BENEFITS OF COMPANION ANIMALS TO CHILDREN

Children exposed to animals in childhood, especially more than one animal, have stronger immune systems and are less likely to suffer from asthma and allergies, according to an article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. Living with animals exposes children to the chemical endotoxin, a powerful stimulator of the immune system found on the surface of bacteria around animals. The *JAMA* study reported that children exposed to two or more cats or dogs during the first year of life had half the risk of developing reactions to common allergens like animals, ragweed, grass, and dust mites.

Empathy, a key component of emotional intelligence, has been shown to be even more important than I.Q. in determining a child's future success and happiness in life. Children in whom love and respect for animals have been instilled have a greater sense of empathy than children who grow up without animals in the home. For children going through a difficult transition, such as a divorce, a move, or the terminal illness and death of a parent, companion animals offer an anchor of unconditional love, comfort, and emotional support. Children find it easier to confide in animals than in people, especially when their trust has been broken. Caring for animals also gives children a sense of competence, the security of a routine, and the feeling of being needed (especially helpful in otherwise chaotic times). Child psychologists point out the value of animals in helping abused children open up and articulate their problems.

MEDICAL BENEFITS OF COMPANION ANIMALS TO HUMANS

Positive interaction with companion animals can almost double our brain's production of the hormone oxytocin, which lowers heart rate, blood pressure, and stress. Oxytocin also bolsters our immune system, protects against infection, and helps prevent massive organ damage caused by sepsis. It has been shown to have a calming and socializing effect on autistic children and children with ADHD.

Social relationships with animals also lower our triglyceride and cholesterol levels and increase production of the feel-good chemicals dopamine, serotonin, and beta endorphin. People who live with animal companions have fewer minor health problems, shorter hospital stays, lower medical costs, and better psychological wellbeing.

Studies show that visits to hospital patients from animals can reduce the amount of pain medication patients require. A visiting dog can lower anxiety, stress, and heart and lung pressure in cardiac patients in just 12 minutes. Coronary heart disease patients who have companion animals are four times less likely to die within the first year after surgery than patients without them. Terminally ill patients say their companion animals are vital in helping them cope with their illness by providing company, affection, and a reason to continue living.

RESPONSIBLE COMPANION ANIMAL CARE

Safety

Animals in a human environment can endanger themselves, or their guardians can inadvertently put them at risk of injury or death. It is important to take the same precautions to protect animals from common dangers that you would take with small children, including:

household cleaning products
pesticides, including certain flea & tick products
herbicides and fungicides
garden fertilizers & plant food
medicines, especially aspirin
ointments and creams
antifreeze
certain human foods, such as chocolate

certain plants, such as some ivy
de-icing salts
swimming pools
small objects that animals can choke on
fireworks and other loud noises
tethering for more than a very short time
riding in the back of a pick-up truck

Never leave a dog in a car on a hot day. Even with the windows open, the temperature inside a car can become fatal within minutes.

In case of emergency, be sure to have the contact information for your veterinarian and also for the nearest 24-hour veterinary clinic in a quickly accessible location. If you leave your animal in the care of someone else while you are away, make sure they have an emergency number to call.

In case of poisoning, in the U.S. call the National Animal Poison Control Center: **800-548-2423** or the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center: **888-426-4435**.

Spay and neuter facts

- Neutered animals are less vulnerable to testicular and prostate cancers. Spaying eliminates the stress and discomfort that females endure during heat periods, eliminates the risk of uterine cancer, and greatly reduces the risk of mammary cancer. Altered animals are also less likely to contract deadly, contagious diseases spread through bodily fluids, such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and feline leukemia (FeLV).
- One female dog and her offspring can produce 67,000 dogs in six years. One female cat and her offspring can produce 420,000 cats in seven years.
- An estimated 6 to 8 million dogs and cats are surrendered to animal shelters every year. Nearly half—3 to 4 million—must be euthanized for lack of homes.
- Approximately 70,000 puppies and kittens born in the United States every day are sent to laboratories to become the subjects of experiments.

What you can do to help

- Adopt animals from shelters or rescue organizations. Consider fostering animals for a shelter or a rescue group.
- Do not support breeders, particularly animal mills (enterprises that mass produce animals), or pet shops that buy animals from breeders or animal mills.
- Adopt a companion animal only if you have sufficient time and financial resources to properly care for them for their entire life. Veterinary care can be expensive. Match the activity and companionship needs of an animal you are considering adopting to your living space and lifestyle.

- Socialize, walk, and play with the animals who are members of your family every day. You and the animals will be happier and healthier. Keeping an animal on a chain or in a crate with little or no social interaction or care harms the animal psychologically and physically.
- When adopting a social animal, if possible, adopt two. They will usually be happier living with a companion of their own species, as long as you make an effort to choose animals with compatible personalities.
- When possible, choose an adult animal. Puppies and kittens are often adopted first, while adult animals tend to be overlooked.
- Speak up when witnessing abuse, neglect, or other irresponsible behavior.
- Ask your local government representative if your community has an emergency preparedness plan in the event of a natural disaster or war, for example, and whether the plan provides for companion animals.
- For possible emergencies, do the following and educate others to do the same:
 - Place a notice on your door telling firefighters how many and what types of companion animals are in the house.
 - Prepare a companion animal emergency kit that includes food, water, a leash, collar, cat carrier, cat litter, extra medications, and other essential items.

Resources

Fact Sheets:

Animals in Entertainment
Fishing and Marine Issues

Books and Periodical Articles:

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