The Benefits of Pet Therapy for Migraine Sufferers

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Pet Therapy and Migraines

Migraine is one of the top 20 most disabling conditions in the world, with 10% of the world's population suffering from this condition, according to the World Health Organization. Of that 10%, 80% of migraine sufferers experience what is referred to as a migraine 'prodrome,' which is the occurrence of symptoms that precede a migraine attack. Prodromes can consist of yawning, food cravings, mood changes, neck pain, and frequent urination. It is during the prodrome period that blurred vision, vertigo, and a lack of concentration may also be experienced.

Migraine attacks can last anywhere from a few hours to several days, with many sufferers experiencing a 'migraine hangover' known as a postdrome, after the attack ceases. The postdrome, much like the prodrome has its own array of symptoms, including fatigue, head pain, cognitive difficulties, gastrointestinal symptoms, mood change, and weakness.

In addition to common migraine symptoms, migraine sufferers are also prone to a variety of mental health illnesses including bipolar disorder, depression, and anxiety, as the constant anticipation of the next migraine episode or the thought of debilitating migraine pain can be overwhelming.

The Benefits of Dog Ownership

There are several reasons why you should consider investing your time and energy into owning a dog if you suffer from migraines. Not only can dogs predict imminent migraines even before the prodrome period, pet therapy can also aid in stress reduction and help ease symptoms of mental illness. Still need convincing?

Detecting Migraines

In the same way seizure alert dogs can sense epileptic seizures, recent studies suggest that dogs may not only be capable of picking up on an impending migraine, but that they can actually be trained to detect an impending migraine and warn their owner before the prodrome period begins.

Researchers from the University and Pittsburg and Health Union recruited dog-owning migraine sufferers and had them complete a brief questionnaire regarding the behaviors of their canine companions leading up to a migraine episode. The research suggests that dogs can, in fact, detect an impending migraine, with 54% of the 1027 participants indicating changes in the behavior of their pooches preceding a migraine attack.

According to participants, the most common behavioral change was in the dog's attentiveness towards its owner, with the dog often refusing to leave its owner's side. Other alerting behaviors included persistent licking, lying at their owner's side, and staring at their owner.

Next page: additional benefits of dog ownership.

One participant noted that her dog became frantic leading up to her attack, displaying uncharacteristic behaviors of restlessness every 15 minutes before her migraine started. Another participant shared that her dog would wake her up in the middle of the night by persistently licking her face on days she would have a migraine episode. She now takes this cue from her dog as an alerting signal and takes medication before migraine symptoms begin.

Reducing Stress

In addition to possibly helping to detect an imminent migraine, dogs can also help with long-term prevention.

Stress is one of the most well known causes of migraines. Shock, anxiety, panic attacks, worry, and fear are all forms of stress that can trigger a migraine episode. According to experts, high levels of stress can cause your brain to release chemicals that cause a migraine attack to occur.

Studies have shown that animals can reduce tension and improve mood, thereby increasing levels of the stress-reducing hormone, oxytocin, and decreasing production of the stress hormone, cortisol.

Petting your dog for just 10 minutes at a time, multiple times throughout the day, is all you need to reap the rewards. Plus, Fido will be a pretty happy guy, too!

Getting Exercise

Another benefit of dog ownership comes in the form of your pup's daily walk. Migraines have a fairly love-hate relationship with exercise. While regular but gentle exercise can significantly reduce migraine attacks, intense or sporadic exercise can actually trigger migraines. Taking your dog on his daily walk is a great way to get consistent exercise without overdoing it and triggering a migraine attack, all while reducing stress and promoting relaxation. It's a win-win for the both of you!

If you do decide to participate in something a bit more physical, such as running at the dog park or going for a jog, be sure to warm up beforehand and start slowly if you're new to physical activity.

Consistency is key when dealing with migraines and exercise, so be sure to take advantage of your dog's insatiable enthusiasm and go on one walk in the morning and one in the evening. Your migraine symptoms will become less frequent and your pup will thank you.

Next page: how dogs help to ease depression.

Easing Depression

Unfortunately, those who suffer from migraines are more likely to experience mental health illnesses including bipolar disorder, anxiety, and depression. Missing work, family functions, and social events is common for those constantly battling with migraine headaches. These absences can put stress on relationships, finances, and work life, leaving a person with extreme anxiety. Never knowing when your next migraine is about to strike or constantly anticipating the debilitating pain of a migraine can also lead to depression in migraine sufferers.

Fortunately, owning a dog can significantly reduce symptoms of depression. Studies have shown that dogs instinctively form close bonds with their human 'pack' members, providing loyalty and affection when they need it the most.

The sheer presence of a dog is calming. Physically petting your dog can reduce blood pressure and increase feel-

good chemicals in the brain. The benefits of having a dog for those with depression go far beyond the calming presence, however. Dogs are also a great source of entertainment and unconditional love, which on its own can be enough to brighten their owner's day.

Offering Companionship

In addition to reducing migraine triggers like anxiety and stress, dogs also offer companionship on the days that you're curled up in the dark with a migraine attack.

The last thing many of us want to do when we're in pain is socialize. But a life with migraines can also be lonely when we constantly have to miss out on social gatherings or family events due to a migraine attack. Having a companion to sit with and offer unconditional love when you're in pain can be incredibly soothing and offer a distraction from your migraine episode.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are many benefits to pet therapy for those who suffer from migraines. Dogs can be trained to predict an imminent migraine episode, allowing you to prepare in advance or attempt to prevent the migraine from occurring altogether. They can also help you de-stress, aid in relaxation, minimize symptoms of depression, and offer companionship on your lonely migraine days.

How has your dog helped you?