

Caring for Your Pets While you are Ill



Animal
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When you lose much of your strength or mobility, simple tasks like walking a dog or cleaning a cat's litter box can seem overwhelming. Moreover, if your immune system is weakened by such illnesses as HIV/AIDS, cancer, kidney or liver disease, old age or pregnancy, you must take extra precautions to avoid disease-causing agents that any human or animal – including pets – can transmit.

Yet living with an illness or an immune compromising condition doesn't mean you have to live without your beloved pet. After all, research indicates that companion animals enhance immune functioning by decreasing stress levels and increasing levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. Pets provide us with a source of affection, support and acceptance, enable us to feel needed and valued, and ease the pain, sorrow and loneliness often experienced during illness.

How Could Pets Increase My Risk?

Although pets can do wonders for our physical and mental well being, they can get and transmit disease. To minimize the risk your pet poses to your health, you must minimize the risks to your pet's health. The key is to understand how best to care for your pet and to work with your veterinarian to keep your pet healthy.

Certain pets are more challenging than others. For example, many exotic animals such as reptiles are more likely than dogs and cats to transmit certain diseases, requiring owners to take extra precautions. In fact, the [HSUS] recommends that exotic animals not be kept as pets. Likewise, puppies and kittens may be more susceptible to disease and prone to play-oriented nipping and scratching. New pets may come with incomplete or unknown medical histories. This does not mean that you have to give up your playful puppy or can't get a new pet. It simply means that you need to rely on a veterinarian or animal shelter adoption counselor to advise you on appropriate pet selection and care.

No pet is guaranteed to be or remain disease-free. However, your veterinarian can suggest preventive guidelines to keep your pet healthy, test your pet for parasites and other problems, and provide medical care to help a sick pet recover. Also, you can minimize risks for you and your pet by keeping your animal indoors, making sure he's well fed and groomed, and taking him to the veterinarian for vaccinations and annual check-ups.

What Can I Do to Protect Myself?

If you have a compromised immune system, it will help to follow these precautions:

- Wash your hands after handling a pet.
- Wear rubber gloves when changing a litter box or cleaning up after a pet; wash your hands afterwards.
- Keep your pet's nails short to minimize scratches.
- Follow your veterinarian's advice on keeping your pet free of fleas and ticks.
- Keep your pet indoors and use a leash outdoors to prevent your pet from hunting, scavenging, fighting and engaging in other activities that expose him to other animals and disease.
- Feed your pet commercial pet food.
- Keep your pet's living and feeding areas clean.
- Keep your pet's vaccinations up to date.
- Seek veterinary care immediately for a sick pet.

How Can I Meet My Pet's Basic Needs? _____

If your condition makes everyday pet care too challenging, you'll need to find outside assistance to make sure your pet gets the food, grooming, exercise and general care he needs.

When relatives, friends and neighbors can't help, a non-profit pet assistance organization, such as Pets For Life (917.468.2938) may be able to lend a hand. Typically, these organizations help pet owners by providing everything from emergency foster care and animal transportation to dog-walking, pet grooming and litter box cleaning services.

If you believe you need this kind of assistance, ask local veterinarians, animal shelters, physicians, health care clinics, social service agencies, veterinary schools and libraries to refer you to resources in your community.



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