Do Pets Really Save $23 Billion a Year in Health Care Costs?

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ANIMAL BEHAVIOR

Do Pets Really Save $23 Billion a Year in Health Care Costs?

Most research does not support industry claims about pet-related health savings.

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Reviewed by Ray Parker

KEY POINTS

- A new pet industry report claims pet-ownership saves Americans $23 billion a year in medical costs.
- Unfortunately, this claim is not supported by most research on human-pet interactions.
- For example, there is little evidence that pet owners make fewer doctor visits or are less likely to be obese.

You need to be careful about industry-funded health claims.

Take the sugar industry. The industry-funded Sugar Association’s mission, for example, is to promote “the role sugar plays in a nutritious, balanced, and enjoyable diet.”
Research Institute (HABRI) has a similar mission. For example, a 25-page report HABRI commissioned concluded pet ownership saves Americans $23 billion a year in health care costs.

The report, *Health Care Cost Savings of Pet Ownership*, was produced by economists from George Mason University and paid for by Banfield Pet Hospitals, the nation’s largest chain of veterinary hospitals. Twenty-three billion dollars in healthcare savings would certainly be great news for pet owners. Unfortunately, a closer analysis of the evidence that the report is based on casts doubt on its conclusions.

**How Might Pet Ownership Reduce Medical Expenses?**

The $23 billion estimate of medical savings is based on five categories of presumed health benefits of pet ownership. They include, for example, reductions in the cost of mental health treatment for children and elderly pet owners and infections from *C. difficile* (a nasty bacteria). But, I will focus on the two categories of expenses that account for the vast majority of the money the researchers claim American pet owners save on medical care.
Claim 1: Pet owners save $15 billion in health care costs because they have fewer doctor visits than non-pet-owners.

This claim is based on the results of just two published studies. The first was a 2007 paper that involved samples of German and Australian pet owners. In both groups, the pet owners went to their doctors less often than people without pets. The second study was a 1990 paper which reported that American pet owners made, on average, about one fewer doctor visits per year than non-owners (8.4 versus 9.5 visits).

Unfortunately, the industry report conveniently ignores studies that found pet owners did not have fewer doctor visits. For example, in a 2003 study of 2,530 adults, pet owners did not go to the doctor less often than non-owners. And in 2005, researchers reported no differences in the number of physician visits among 2,551 pet-owning and non-owning elderly Australians. Nor does the HABRI report cite a study of a representative sample of Americans that did not find any differences between people with and without pets in their fre-
Further, the industry report ignores research that has found that any differences in the general health of pet owners and non-owners is the product of demographic and socioeconomic factors, rather than pet ownership *per se*. These include age, sex, ethnicity, and income.

For example, a study of 2,500 Americans reported that all the presumed health benefits of pet-keeping disappeared when demographic factors were taken into account. The researchers concluded that pets do not cause better health—rather, people with better health were more likely to have the energy and resources to have a pet. Similarly, many studies have found no differences in the health of pet owners and non-owners. These included, for example, a 2000 study of 42,000 Californians, a 2008 study of 314 Australians, and a 2020 study of 13,000 New Zealanders. Indeed, a growing body of research has reported that the so-called "pet effect" on human health is actually the result of demographic and socioeconomic differences.

In short, the preponderance of the evidence does not support the pet industry’s claim that pet ownership saves Americans $15 billion in doctor bills annually.

**Claim 2: Dog walkers are less obese, resulting in savings of $4.5 billion in medical bills.**

The claim that dog walking reduces our annual medical bills by $4.5 billion is also based on a house of cards. In their excellent podcast on the research, “Replication Crisis” in psy-
Yet, the HABRI report’s contention about the medical savings associated with dog walking rests on a single 2008 study. The goal of the research was to investigate how neighborhood characteristics affected the frequency of dog walking and rates of obesity.

The researchers did find that dog walkers had lower rates of obesity than people who did not have a dog or owners who did not walk their dogs. But, the devil is in the details. The authors of the HABRI report neglected to mention that the dog walkers in the study lived in significantly wealthier neighborhoods than the other two groups.

And in the United States, wealthy people have lower rates of obesity than people with lower incomes. Hence, lower rates of obesity in dog walkers were probably the result of differences in income, rather than the effects of dog walking.

In an email to me, Professor Carri Westgarth of Liverpool University pointed out that most studies have not found a link
little evidence that supports the idea that children who live with or walk with dogs are any fitter or less likely to be obese than those who do not." Similarly, in a 2016 study, teens who walked their dogs got more exercise, but there was no effect of dog walking on BMI. And Australian researchers reported that the odds of being obese were actually higher in mothers who walked dogs with their families.

Perhaps the best study on dog walking and weight loss was a randomized control trial in which dog owners in an intervention group were given regular e-mail messages for three months encouraging them to walk their dogs. The good news is that the intervention was successful. Indeed, the subjects were walking their dogs more when assessed six months and one year later. The bad news is the increases in dog walking did not affect BMI.

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Finally, in 2020, researchers conducted a meta-analysis (a study of studies) of 21 peer-reviewed research papers on pets and obesity. Their conclusion was: “No significant association existed between pet ownership and obesity.”

The bottom line is that there is little to no good evidence to support the idea that either pet ownership or dog walking is associated with a reduction in obesity or that dog walking saves over $4.5 billion in annual health care costs.
Factors That Increase the Medical Expenses of Pet Owners

Oddly, the HABRI analysis on the economic impact of pets on health costs does not take into account pet-related factors that increase pet owners’ medical expenses. Take, for example, falls and dogs bites,

**Pet-Related falls cost Americans $2.6 billion in health care costs.**

In the United States, about 86,000 American pet owners wind up in hospital emergency rooms each year because of pet-related falls. (See *Tripping Over Pets Can Have Life-Changing Consequences*). According to the Centers For Disease Control (CDC), the average cost of a trip to the hospital caused by falling is $30,000. If I did the math right, this translates into total medical annual expenses of $2.6 billion

**Dog bites cost pet owners $4 billion a year.**

Four and a half million Americans are bitten by dogs each year. According to the WISQAR Cost of Injury database main-
large cost of $3,216 per visit, the total direct cost of the ER visits was $956 million.

Further, 13,000 of these dog bite victims were hospitalized, and their average medical bill was $53,165. In an email, the veterinary epidemiologist John Tulloch told me that, based on the CDC data, the total economic burden of dog bites is about $4 billion a year. This amount included the costs of emergency department visits, hospitalizations, costs associated with work loss, and quality of life. (Further, in 2022, insurance companies in the United States forked out $1.3 billion in settlements for dog bite liability claims, and the average settlement was $65,000.

The Industry’s Report On Pet Ownership Health Savings Is Misleading

In his book The Animals Among Us, the noted anthrozoologist John Bradshaw wrote, "The supported health-enhancing properties of pets increasingly appear largely illusory, resting on selective reporting of studies seeming to show some kind of positive connection between well-being and pet ownership."

The pet products industry's contention that Americans save at least $23 billion a year in medical costs exemplifies Bradshaw's point. It relies on cherry-picked results of a few studies and ignores the large body of research that has found no health differences between pet owners and non-owners. Further, it does not take into account the billions of dollars in medical bills caused by tripping over dogs and cats, and dog bites.
References


About the Author