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Man's best friend is also good medicine

Study shows animals ease anxiety levels in heart patients

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CNN

(CNN) -- The white coats of cardiologists are a regular fixture for heart patients, but more and more, the furry coats of man's best friends might become a common sight.

Researchers at UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles, California, found that a 12-minute bedside visit with a dog can help ease anxiety levels by 24 percent in heart failure patients, compared to a 10 percent drop when patients had a visit from a human volunteer, and no drop in patients who had no visit.

Results of the 76-patient study were presented last week at the American Heart Association's annual Scientific Sessions in Dallas, Texas. The study was funded by the Pet Care Trust Foundation, a non-profit organization which promotes human-animal interaction and bonding.

In the study, effects of dog and volunteer visits were compared with those of volunteers only, and with patients who had no visits and remained at rest.

Heart pressures indicating cardiac function and stress hormone levels were monitored and patients answered an anxiety assessment questionnaire before and after the visits. Although levels of the stress hormone norepinephrine and critical pressure measures also decreased, suggesting improved cardiac function, the most marked response was seen in anxiety levels.

"The first thing you notice is that the patient's facial expression changes to a smile and the stress of the world seems to be lifted off their shoulders," study author Kathy Cole said.

Feelings of depression and helplessness are common among heart patients, Cole said, and just three nights in a hospital is enough to make some patients feel anxious and unsettled.

During the visit, the furry friend is allowed to lie on the bed next to the patient with its head within two feet of the patient's. Most patients petted the dog, while others engaged human volunteers in conversation about the dog.

Canines used in the study are specially trained animal-assisted therapy dogs that undergo a series of trainings, evaluations and certifications to qualify as therapy dogs. Dog breeds varied: Researchers used everything from Bernese mountain dogs to miniature schnauzers.

However, a dog doesn't have to be specially trained to have a calming effect on its human counterparts. In fact, the animal doesn't even have to be a dog in order to help.

"As long as the animal has meaning to the patient, or a relationship with the animal, it can help calm the patient," Cole said.

The latest study falls in line with previous research in the field of animal-assisted therapy which has shown that the therapy reduces blood pressure in both healthy and hypertensive patients, and that it aids in the recovery of cancer patients as well.

The study also supports the well-documented phenomenon that the greater a person's level of networking and social support, the more likely that person is to have healthier heart function, with or without heart disease.

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