

Furry friends can boost health

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

There are many therapeutic benefits to pet ownership. It's been well documented that a furry friend can reduce blood pressure, and therapy dogs are used in hospitals nationwide to help patients heal.

While the relationship between people and animals has been widely heralded, now comes word that scientists are finding new ways those favorite furry creatures can influence health in the long term.

"As helpful as a loving animal can be at the end of a long work day, researchers worldwide are seeing how they might literally be life-savers in developing treatments for diseases," notes Lisa Peterson, spokesperson for the American Kennel Club.

Considering the genetic makeup of humans and canines are roughly 85 percent similar and there are around 400 diseases that plague both species, scientists have found an uncanny connection between animal and human health. Now they're finding how the health of purebred dogs can directly affect that of humans.

The American Kennel Club Canine Health Foundation has been at the forefront of this medical research.

One of the foremost studies of this sort involves research that isolated the gene responsible for night blindness in briard dogs. Researchers found that the same gene caused Leber Congenital Amaurosis, a childhood-onset disease that causes blindness in early adulthood when not treated. Thanks to this research, gene therapy now has been developed to treat young people with the disease.

This kind of connection between canine and human disease is not unprecedented. Scientists have also isolated a gene in dogs that not only causes a specific canine spinal disease but also Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease, in humans. Because of this discovery there is now hope the disease in the dog will assist human research.

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It's not just the more obscure illnesses or circumstances making canine research invaluable. Cancer is one major area where canine cancer research has correlated directly to human research, leading to much hope.

As with humans, cancer in dogs occurs spontaneously, is not an induced disease, and the lifetime risk of cancer in humans and dogs is similar. Of course, people and dogs share the same environment, and therefore are exposed to comparable risk factors. And the natural history of most cancers and their response to treatment are comparable between both species.

But what's most promising is medical researchers can move faster when studying cancer in dogs, because the chronology of cancer is adapted to dogs' shorter lifespans.

For example, the disease in dogs becomes apparent within 10 years instead of 60 in humans. So, success or failure of treatments can be measured within two years among dogs instead of at least five for humans.

"Dogs age faster than humans," says Peterson. "By researching diseases in them, they can guard humans against certain illnesses."

For more information about the AKC Canine Health Foundation, visit www.caninehealthfoundation.org.

With additional research by responsible breeders and organizations, there's no telling what human conditions can be aided by those furry friends.