

7 May 2008

By: Stefan Anitei, Science Editor



Polka Dot Pup

Dogs Boost Kids' Immunity

But not the symptoms of allergies.

The dog may be man's best friend, but sometimes this can be true in ways you would not have expected. A new research published in the European Respiratory Journal shows that young kids having a pet dog may have a stronger immune system that could protect them against asthma and other allergies. The team, led by Joachim Heinrich of the Institute of Epidemiology at the Heimholtz Center in Munich, Germany, investigated a poll of over 3,000 children whose health state had been followed-up from birth to the age of 6. Blood analyses revealed that, in households with dogs, children faced a reduced risk of becoming sensitized to pollens and inhaled allergens connected to asthma, wheezing, allergic rhinitis and eczema, when compared to those living in dog-less homes. "Early exposure to germs brought into the house on dog fur could stimulate maturation of the immune system," Heinrich explained. Thus, the early stimulation of the body's defenses help the immune system not to run into allergic overdrive when facing sudden exposure to dust house mites, pollens and other triggers. Still, even if children raised in houses with dogs had a fortified immune system, they did not display decreased symptoms, being equally prone to asthma and the other allergy issues, just like the kids lacking a pet dog did. "It is not crystal clear why this is so. It could be that the protective benefit may show up when the children in the study are a little older." Heinrich said to the AFP. In this respect, the team will present further results when the children will be aged 10. "Further work is needed to understand why dogs appear to deliver this protection before a recommendation can be made to get a canine companion," said Heinrich. **Dogs and human health**A 2007 study showed that dogs can improve the mental health of their owners. One of the first positive effects comes from the sense of responsibility, because it implies caring for a living being and a partner. Dogs also keep feelings of loneliness at bay. Owning a dog will bring you more social contact, as you have to get out of the house to walk the dog daily, which places you among other people (not to mention the advantage that a daily walk brings to your health, especially for sedentary people). The love for dogs (or other pets) is an easy conversation-starter that increases social contact. Studies have shown that almost 50% of all American women would allow anyone with a cute puppy to approach them. Very short interactions with an animal that's not even a pet can significantly reduce a patient's anxiety and fear before a serious medical procedure. Medical investigations showed that after brief interactions with dogs, blood levels of the stress hormone cortisol (whose long term effects are harmful) go down. Even watching tropical fish in a tank releases relaxation hormones. Children with pets (especially dogs) possess higher self-esteem, confidence and experience less fear. Children and adults find in a pet a non-judgmental confidant for their concerns. And all that without even including the unconditional love dogs show for their owners.