

DOG

Companionship and Its Benefits to Humans

Dogs (*Canis familiaris*) have been “man’s best friends” since the beginning of time. This timeless relationship continues to evolve into new kinds of human-dog interactions that increasingly benefits society.

Traditionally, dogs have aided humans in tasks such as hunting, livestock herding, and guarding. However, as society moved from small rural communities to increasingly large metropolitan areas, the dog’s role changed.

Throughout the years, dogs have helped to locate missing persons and have assisted in rescue operations in the aftermath of disasters such as earthquakes and bomb explosions. Dog participation in law enforcement activities have been particularly successful in the area of narcotic detection. Dogs even served, along with soldiers, in patrol assignments during World War II and the Vietnam War. Today, dog companionship has taken on a new meaning as Americans increasingly consider their dogs another member of the family rather than just property.

More than 30 million Americans live with one or more dogs (Marks, 1999). Furthermore, according to a national survey, the majority of dog owners selected companionship as the major reason for having a dog (American

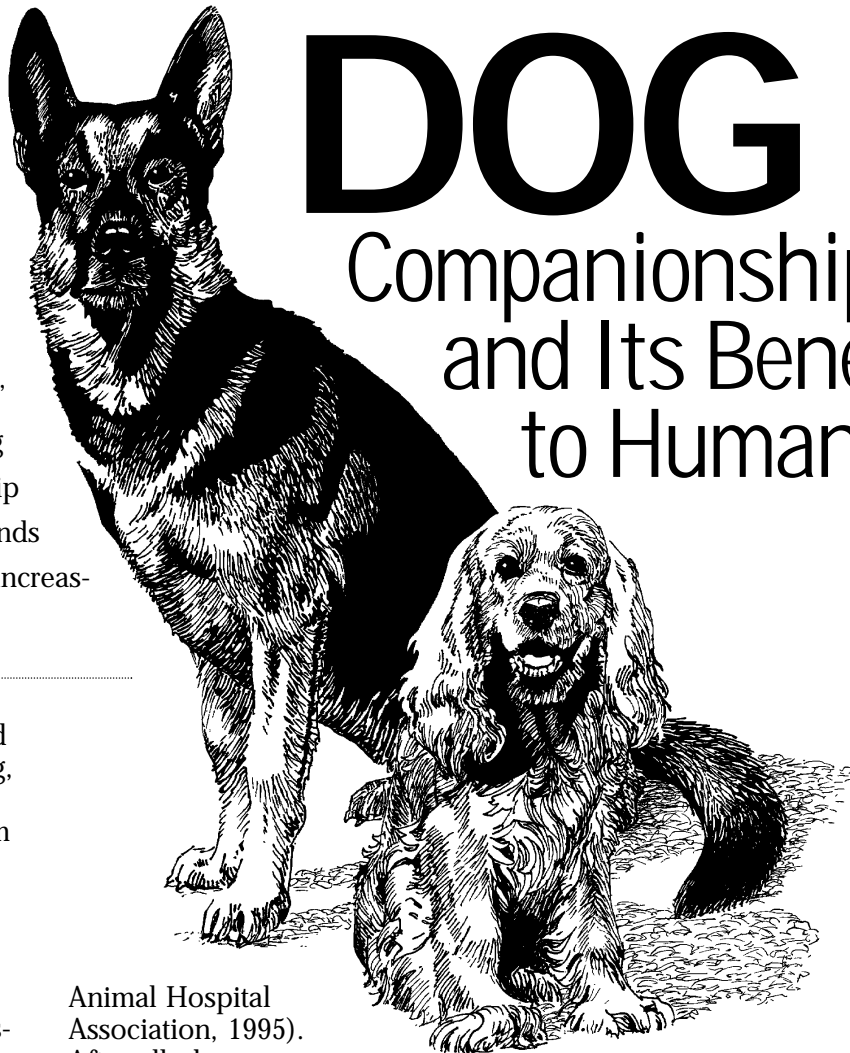
Animal Hospital Association, 1995).

After all, dogs are non-judgmental, give unconditional love, can be trusted with our most intimate feelings and emotions, and are highly intelligent; hence, highly trainable to do almost anything. These dog characteristics can enhance the lives of thousands of youths and adults, especially those with disabilities and/or those who live in continuing care facilities.

There are approximately 320,625 people between the ages of 16 and 64 with some kind of disability in the state of Alabama alone (U.S. Census, 1990). Of this total, 156,271 people, of which 53 percent are women, have either a mobility limitation or a self-care limitation. Furthermore, 10.8 percent

of the people with the above types of limitation live alone and 0.6 percent live in group quarters such as rehabilitation centers, shelters, and nursing homes.

By embracing *Canis familiaris*, residents in rehabilitation and learning centers and nursing homes, patients in hospitals, and families in general feel comfort, stimulus, joy and respect for all living beings. In addition, dog companionship has been shown to provide other benefits that can improve the quality of life of many more thousands of Alabamians. This publication will discuss and examine the physical, physiological, and psychological benefits of dog companionship.



Dogs for the Visually, Hearing, and Physically Impaired

The guide dog for the visually impaired is the most well-known type of companion dog. However, these dogs are legally defined by federal law (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990) as service dogs. Guide dogs are trained to enhance the mobility and independence of blind men and women. Working in and outside the house, together with other social activities can now be attained with the aid of these highly trained dogs.

It should be mentioned that the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 states that guide dogs are allowed everywhere the general public is allowed. This includes restaurants, stores, and all places of public accommodation that have "no pets" policies.

Hearing dogs are trained to help people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. These dogs alert a person with a hearing impairment to various sounds such as a smoke alarm, an alarm clock, the telephone ring, another person, the doorbell, knocks at the door, a baby crying, and sirens.

Service dogs for the physically disabled are trained to increase the mobility and independence of people who use wheelchairs (Figure 1), walkers, crutches, or canes. These dogs perform such varied tasks as pulling wheelchairs, retrieving items that are dropped, turning light switches off and on, opening and closing doors and drawers, carrying items by mouth or in backpacks, and helping the person rise from sitting or fallen positions. In addition, a number of empirical studies have demonstrated that the presence of a companion dog serves to increase the quantity and quality of attention



Figure 1. Service dogs for the physically disabled are trained to increase the mobility and independence of people who use wheelchairs.

directed toward the physically handicapped people by both familiar individuals and strangers (National Institutes of Health, 1987). This "magnet" effect of companion dogs can be of great benefit to the handicapped individuals because it reduces the tendency to be avoided or ignored by nonhandicapped people.

These dogs can also be of great benefit to people with disabilities associated with arthritis, ataxia (poor balance), multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, and chronic pain. As with guide dogs, most states are allowing service dogs for the physically handicapped full access to public places.

Dogs for the visually, hearing, and physically impaired can be obtained through established organizations or individual trainers. However, the latter may be difficult to locate. Some established organizations in the United States and Canada provide skilled dogs trained at various centers.

Most of their dogs come from their own selective breeding programs that primarily use American Kennel Club (AKC) registered purebred Labrador Retrievers and Golden Retrievers (Figure 2) selected for their excellent temperament, intelligence, and health. However, some organizations successfully use German Shepherds (Figure 6), Pembroke Welsh Corgis, and mixed-breeds (dogs that do not possess a known lineage) (Figure 3) from animal shelters.

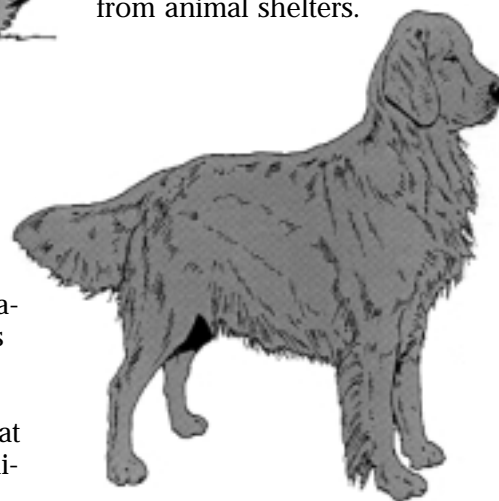


Figure 2. The Golden Retriever is one of the favorite breeds used to enhance the lives of people with disabilities and/or living in continuing care facilities.



Figure 3. Mixed breeds from animal shelters have been used very successfully as hearing dogs.

Dog-Assisted Therapy

Basically, therapy dogs try to normalize the institutional experience by providing emotional support (Figure 4). Although these dogs are not legally defined by federal law, they visit hospitals, nursing homes, schools for mentally retarded children and adults, and other facilities or institutions.

Therapy dogs have been tremendously successful, especially in the areas of physical rehabilitation and psychological recovery. For example, the presence of animals in institutional settings is associated with the tendency of older persons to smile and talk more, reach out toward people and objects, exhibit more alertness and attention, and experience more symptoms of well-being and less depression (National Institutes of Health, 1987). These studies have proven pet programs superior in producing psychosocial benefits compared to some other alternative therapies such as arts and crafts programs, friendly visitor programs, and conventional psychotherapy. Furthermore, the introduction of dogs in visitation programs in children's hospitals around the country has met with great success. By developing a bond with the dog, the patient may achieve documentable progress toward therapeutic goals and have a very heart-warming and memorable experience. This is true especially for people living in continuing care facilities. After all, sometimes it is nice to have someone to hold and to talk to.



Figure 4. Although therapy dogs are not legally defined by federal law, they are allowed to visit hospitals to provide emotional support.

In order for a therapy dog to perform effectively it must have obedience training, a calm and nonaggressive temperament, and good health. To be obedience trained the dog must be able to:

- Walk beside the handler
- "Sit," "lay down," and "stand" on command and "stay" until released from command
- Come quickly when called and "sit" on the left side of the handler and wait for the next command

In addition these dogs must also feel comfortable in the presence of wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, oxygen tanks, food carts, and any other equipment patients and therapists may use.

Although the Golden Retriever (Figure 2) and the Labrador Retriever are among the favorite breeds used in dog-assisted therapy programs, breeds such as the Collie (Figure 5), German Shepherd (Figure 6), and Pembroke Welsh Corgi have been used successfully. Unfortunately, not every dog can be a therapy dog.



Figure 5. The collie has been successful in dog-assisted therapy programs.

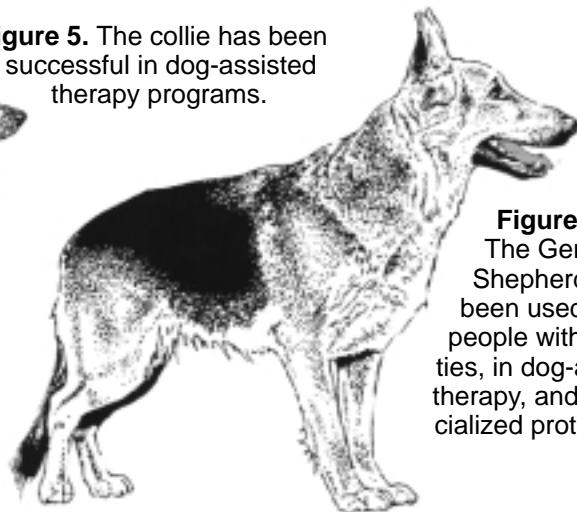


Figure 6. The German Shepherd has been used to aid people with disabilities, in dog-assisted therapy, and for specialized protection.

Table 1. Facts About Dogs

Class –mammal
Body Temperature –100 to 102.5° F
Resting Pulse Rate –60 to 140 beats/minute
Respiration Rate –10 to 30 breaths/minute
Vision –dichromatic (detect two colors: blue and green)
Reach Puberty –6 to 9 months
Length of Estrous Cycle –about 8 months
Length of Estrus –5 to 9 days
Length of Gestation –63 to 65 days
Weaning Time –7 to 8 weeks of age
Order –carnivore
Dentition –temporary teeth erupt at about 20 days of age, and a full set of 42 permanent teeth are fully erupted by 6 months of age
Digestive System –monogastric

Table 2. Dog Vaccination Schedule

Age	Vaccine
5 to 8 weeks	DHLPPC (Distemper, Hepatitis, Leptospirosis, Parainfluenza, Parvovirus, and Coronavirus)
12 to 14 weeks	DHLPPC booster
16 to 18 weeks	DHLPPC booster
5 to 6 months	Rabies
Annually (Adults)	DHLPPC and Rabies

Table 3. Most Common Parasites in Dogs

Type	Parasite
Internal	Heartworm, Roundworm, Hookworm, Whipworm, Tapeworm, Coccidia
External	Flea, Tick, Mange Mite

Table 4. Guidelines for Selecting Foods and Feeding Dogs

- Make sure the label has the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) guarantee
- Look for meat (beef, chicken, turkey or lamb) as the first ingredient, rice as the main grain in the formula, and mixed tocopherols (vitamin E) as preservatives
- Be certain that the food has an expiration date, and that it has not turned rancid
- Store food in a sealed container in a cool dry place
- Feed the dog according to correct body weight and condition, and consider factors such as growth, adult maintenance, gestation, lactation, level of activity and age
- When changing foods, mix ¼ of the new food to ¾ of the old food, and increase gradually to prevent gastric upsets
- Watch the dog's stool, weight, and coat when changing foods
- Make sure the dog has fresh water at all times

National organizations that certify dogs and their handlers include The Delta Society and Therapy Dogs International, Inc. All dogs accepted into Delta Society's Pet Partners program must pass a three-part screening of health, skills, and aptitude before certification. To be certified by Therapy Dogs International, Inc., dogs and handlers must pass the fairly rigorous Canine Good Citizen Test, sponsored by the American Kennel Club (AKC).

Patients and staff should have the option of not participating in dog-assisted therapy.

Other Services and Benefits of Dog Companionship

- A dog may be the solution for victims of abusive spouses or stalkers, especially if a gun is not an option because of children in the home. A dog can be trained to react to threats against the owner and immediate family. The German Shepherd (Figure 6) is one of the most popular breeds used for protection.
- A dog can be a benefit in emergencies for those with disabilities associated with seizure disorders. Researchers at the University of Florida reported that seizure-alert dogs notify their owners of an impending seizure several minutes before the seizure onset by exhibiting marked changes in behavior, including close eye contact, circling, pawing and barking (Reep et al., 1999). Furthermore, these researchers reported that seizure-response dogs assist their owners after a seizure has begun by remaining close to them, providing comfort, safety, and physical assistance. A survey of a specific group of

Table 5. Dog Obedience Exercises^a

- All work must be with the dog on a leash
- Require the dog to walk beside you
- **Sit Stay**—require the dog to sit in the same spot while you leave or stand six feet away for one minute, then return and release the dog from the stay command
- **Down Stay**—require the dog to lay down and stay in the down position for three minutes and stand six feet away until time is up, then return and release the dog from the stay command
- **Stand Stay**—require the dog to stay standing without moving its feet while you circle the dog or leave and stand six feet away, then return the dog to the heeling position and release the dog from the stay command
- **Recall and Finish**—require the dog to sit six feet away from you and make sure the dog comes quickly to you and heel when called

^a From Guevara (1999).

people having at least one seizure per month revealed that 69 percent have a dog; 11 percent reported plausible alerting behavior by their dog; and 33 percent reported responding behavior by their dog (Reep et al., 1999). Most trainers agree that responding behavior can be trained but that alerting occurs spontaneously. It has also been suggested that chemical changes in the brain prior to a seizure might be sensed by a dog.

- A companion dog, according to medical research, can lower a person's blood pressure and mitigate the effects of loneliness. Researchers at the Baker Medical Research Institute in Melbourne, Australia, observed that pet owners (men and women) had significantly lower systolic blood pressure and plasma triglycerides than did nonowners (Anderson et al., 1992). In addition, results from a previous study found that postmyocardial infarction survival rates were much higher among pet owners than among nonowners (National Institutes of Health, 1987). The Australian People and Pets Survey of 1994 shows that dog

owners, compared to nonpet owners, are more physically active, visit the doctor less often, less likely to take medication for high blood pressure, and are less likely to report feeling lonely (Heady, 1995). Therefore, those who own dogs can expect health cost savings, both to households and government, in addition to enjoying the companionship of the family pet.

- A dog can enhance self-esteem and feelings of competence in older children, as well as improve motivation, when given the responsibility for its exercise, training, and feeding. This is true especially among those considered at risk. It has also been suggested that exposure to pets should facilitate the establishment and maintenance of relationships with peers, especially in grade and high school (National Institutes of Health, 1987). Families can spend quality time and share memorable moments by having their youths participate in many dog-related activities that offer safe fun and recreation. Some of these activities include the following:

Obedience Trials

Dogs are required to retrieve articles, jump fences, and do heeling patterns. It's a great way to win titles, and best of all, have wondrous fun with "their" dogs.

Frisbee Competitions

Dogs catching a frisbee can become a "prize worth working for," while enjoying the outdoors in a healthy and fun youth-dog adventure.

Flyball Tournaments

They consist of a relay type of sport where dogs race over a series of jumps, fetch balls from a ball-box and race back to the start so that the next dog in the relay team continues to run the course.

Agility Trials

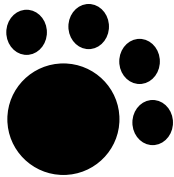
These type of contests display the dog's ability to take commands, as to where to go on an obstacle course made up of jumps, tunnels, catwalks, and A-frames. Testing the dog's ability is a great and healthy way to have fun.

Dog Care

Owners must understand that choosing to share their homes and lives with one or more dogs means keeping their end of the bargain. In other words, together with the joy that comes from owning a dog, certain things must be done to secure a happy and healthy animal. Regular veterinary checkups, optimal nutrition and protection against injuries are extremely important.

Additionally, having their male dog neutered or their female dog spayed is not “cruel.” In fact, it is much healthier and beneficial to the dog. For the male dog it means fewer problems with the prostate gland and lower rates of testicular cancer, while for the female dog it means fewer chances of ovarian cancer and uterine infections. Most important, neutering or spaying your dog will contribute to solving the pet overpopulation problem.

Dog-owner education in the areas of health, nutrition, and training is necessary to increase the chance that both dog and owner will remain together for the rest of the natural life of the dog. Tables 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 provide some information in the areas mentioned.



Conclusion

Companion dogs do not remedy all the difficulties posed by a disability. However, they can provide the physical and psychological support needed to move a person towards independence, and somewhat improve their daily life. This includes guiding and alerting people with impaired vision or hearing, retrieving dropped items for the physically challenged, and/or just providing joy and comfort.

More recently, the concept of dogs in healthcare facilities has evolved into dog-assisted therapy programs in which trained dogs help patients achieve documentable progress toward therapeutic goals. These programs have been tremendously successful, especially in the areas of physical rehabilitation and psychological/emotional recovery. Medical research has determined that contact with dogs can lower blood pressure and fend off heart attacks. Increasingly, therefore, the elderly have embraced *Canis familiaris*.

Other benefits companion dogs have been shown to provide are:

- Decreased feelings of anxiety, stress and isolation
- Increased self-esteem, sense of responsibility and competence in older children
- Enhanced respect for all living beings

Moreover, dog-related activities enable families to spend quality time together, while setting different goals for their four-legged buddies.

The following organizations are dedicated to promoting the physical and emotional well being of people through mutually beneficial and safe interaction with dogs.

Organizations

American Kennel Club (AKC)
260 Madison Avenue, 4th Floor
New York, NY 10016
and
5580 Centerview Drive, Suite 200
Raleigh, NC 27606- 3390
(212) 696-8200
www.akc.org

Birmingham Kennel Club, Inc.
100 Weatherly Way
Pelham, AL 35124
(205) 967-9180
www.bkclub.org

14 Canine Companions for Independence
National Headquarters
P.O. Box 446
Santa Rosa, CA 95402-0446
(800) 572-2275 (V/TDD)
www.caninecompanions.org

Canine Partners For Life
P.O. Box 170
Cochranville, PA 19330-0170
(610) 869-4902
www.chesco.com/k94life

Delta Society
289 Perimeter Road
East Renton, WA 98055-1329
(800) 869-6898
www.deltasociety.org

Dogs for the Deaf, Inc.
10175 Wheeler Rd.
Central Point, OR 97502 (541)
826-9220 (V/TDD)
www.dogsforthe deaf.org

Dog Ears, Inc.
4200 East Britton Rd.
Oklahoma City, OK 73131
(405) 478-2303
<http://connections.oklahoman.net/dogears>

Fidos For Freedom, Inc.
P.O. Box 5508
Laurel, MD 20726
(410) 880-4178
www.fidosforfreedom.org

Guide Dogs of America
13445 Glenoaks Blvd.
Sylmar, CA 91342
(818) 362-5834
www.guidedogsofamerica.org

Guide Dogs for the Blind, Inc.
P.O. Box 151200
San Rafael, CA 94915-1200
(800) 295-4050
www.guidedogs.com

Guiding Eyes for the Blind
611 Granite Springs Rd.
Yorktown Heights, NY 10598
(800) 942-0149
www.guiding-eyes.org

Hand-in-Paw, Inc.
5342 Oporto Madrid Blvd. S.
Birmingham, AL 35210
(205) 591-7006
www.handinpaw.org

Humane Society of the Tennessee Valley
P.O. Box 9479
Knoxville, TN 37940
(423) 573-9675
Email: KnoxHumane@aol.com

Huntsville City Animal Control Center
4950 Triana Blvd.
Huntsville, AL 35805
(256) 883-3782
www.ci.huntsville.al.us/Animal/animal.htm

Huntsville Humane Society
2812 Johnson Rd.
Huntsville, AL 35805
(256) 881-8081

Huntsville Obedience Training Club
131 Export Circle
Huntsville, AL 35806
(256) 852-4377
http://advicom.net/~krpauluk

Independent Assistance Dog Association
P.O. Box 150217
Lakewood, CO 80215
(303) 234-9512

International Association of Assistance Dog Partners
P.O. Box 1326
Sterling Heights, MI 48311
(810) 826-3938
www.ismi.net/iaadp

Magic City Canine Club Dog Agility Club
504 St. Annes Cr.
Birmingham, AL 35244
(205) 991-3135

Marchenhaft Service Dogs Specialized Protection
45 Confederation St.
Glen Williams, ONTARIO
L7G 3R4 Canada
(905) 873-7882
www.marchenhaft.com

Montgomery Humane Society
1150 John Overton Dr.
Montgomery, AL 36110-3235
(334) 409-0622
www.montgomeryhumane.com

Montgomery Kennel Club
1205 McCain Rd.
Wetumpka, AL 36092
(334) 567-5304

National Education for Assistance Dog Services, Inc.
P.O. Box 213
West Boylston, MA 01583
(508) 422-9064 (V/TDD)
http://chamber.worcester.ma.us

Nightwinds International Dog Training Specialized Protection
P.O. Box 388-HRC-2
Tucson, AZ 85735
(520) 295-9225
www.nightwinds.com

North Alabama Canine Cruisers Dog Agility Club
1050 Dockside Dr. # 807
Huntsville, AL 35824
(256) 464-5353

North American Dog Agility Council (NADAC)
HCR 2 Box 277
St. Maries, ID 83861
www.nadac.com

Obedience Training Center of Huntsville
1950 Max Luther Dr. NW
Huntsville, AL 35810
(256) 852-8060
www.otch.com

Paws With A Cause
4646 South Division
Wayland, MI 49348
(616) 877-7297 (V/TDD)
www.pawswithacause.org

San Francisco SPCA Hearing Dog Program
2500 16th Street
San Francisco, CA 94103
(415) 554-3020
www.sfspcahdhp.org

Southeastern Guide Dogs, Inc.
4210 77th Street East
Palmetto, FL 34221
(941) 729-5665
www.guidedogs.org

Susquehanna Service Dogs
555 LeSentier Lane
Harrisburg, PA 17112
(717) 599-5920
www.kss.org/ssd

Therapet Animal Assisted Therapy Foundation
P.O. Box 1696
Whitehouse, TX 75791-1696
(903) 839-1289
www.therapet.com

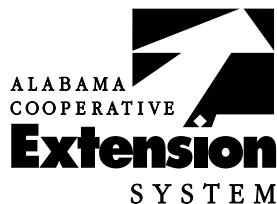
Therapy Dogs of Huntsville, Inc.
P.O. Box 10013
Huntsville, AL 35801-0013
(256) 536-7123

Therapy Dogs International, Inc.
88 Bartley Road
Flanders, NJ 07945
(973) 252-9800
www.tdi-dog.org

United States Dog Agility Association, Inc. (USDAA)
P.O. Box 850955
Richardson, TX 75085-0955
(972) 231-9700
www.usdaa.com

References

- American Animal Hospital Association. 1995. Fifth Annual National Pet Owner Survey. AAHA. AAHAPR@aol.com
- Anderson, W.P., C.M. Reid and G.L. Jennings. 1992. Pet ownership and risk factors for cardiovascular disease. *Medical Journal Australia*. 157:298-301.
- Animal Protection Institute (API). 1999. Buying Commercial Pet Food-A Checklist. In: "What's Really in Pet Food" Report. Online 1999, July 23.
- Case, L.P. 1999. *The Dog: Its Behavior, Nutrition, and Health*. Iowa State University Press, 2121 South State Avenue, Ames, Iowa 50014
- Guevara, V.G. 1999. The Obedience Exercises. Puppy and Adult Basic Beginners Course. Online 1999, May 31.
- Heady, B. 1995. Health Benefits of Pets: Results from the Australian People and Pets Survey. Fourth National Conference on Urban Animal Management in Australia. Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) P.O. Box 371 Artarmon NSW 2064 Australia. Avahq@ava.com.au
- Marks, J. 1999. Tail of the pampered pooch. In: *U.S. News & World Report Magazine*. May 17, 1999 issue.
- National Institutes of Health. 1987. The Health Benefits of Pets. Office of Medical Applications of Research (OMAR) Workshop Summary. September 10-11. Bethesda, Maryland.
- PAWS USA. 1999. Dog Activities. Austin Pets Alive! Supporting the No-Kill Millennium. Online 1999, May 31.
- Reep, R.L., D. Dalziel, P. Davenport and B. Uthman. 1999. Evaluating the Abilities of Seizure-Alert Dogs. Colleges of Veterinary Medicine and Medicine, University of Florida. Online 1999, July 15.
- U.S. Census. 1990. U.S. Bureau of the Census. U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, DC.
- U.S. Congress. 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act. Public Law 101-336. July 26, 1990. 104 Stat.327.



UNP-8

Julio E. Correa, *Extension Animal Scientist*, Associate Professor, Soil, Plant and Animal Sciences, Alabama A&M University; **Marquita F. Davis**, *Family Life Specialist*, and **Wilma J. Ruffin**, *Family and Human Development Specialist*, both with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System at Alabama A&M University; **Robert A. Ebert**, *Extension Animal Scientist*, and **James G. Floyd**, *Extension Veterinarian*, Professor, both in Animal and Dairy Sciences at Auburn University

For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county's name to find the number.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work in agriculture and home economics, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, and other related acts, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University) offers educational programs, materials, and equal opportunity employment to all people without regard to race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, veteran status, or disability.

UPS, 5M15, **New Nov 1999**, UNP-8