



BEHAVIOR  
SERIES

# Caring for Pets When You're Ill

**W**HEN YOU LOSE MUCH OF YOUR STRENGTH OR MOBILITY, simple tasks like walking a dog or cleaning a cat's litter box can seem overwhelming. And if your immune system is weakened by HIV/AIDS, cancer, kidney or liver disease, old age, or pregnancy, you must take extra precautions to avoid disease-causing agents that any human or animal—including pets—can transmit.

Yet living with an illness or immunocompromising condition doesn't mean you have to live without your beloved pet. After all, research indicates that companion animals enhance immune functioning by decreasing stress levels and increasing levels of self-confidence and self-esteem. Pets provide us with a source of affection, support, and acceptance; enable us to feel needed and valued; and ease the pain, sorrow, and loneliness often experienced during illness.

For someone with a serious medical condition, the psychological and physical benefits of pet caregiving usually outweigh the risk of acquiring an illness from the pet—provided that proper precautions are followed.

## How Could Pets Increase My Risk?

Although pets can do wonders for our physical and mental well-being, they can get and transmit disease. To minimize the risk your pet poses to your health, you must minimize the risks to your pet's health. The key is to understand how best to care for your pet and to work with your veterinarian to keep your pet healthy.

Certain pets are more challenging than others. For example, many exotic animals, such as reptiles, are more likely than dogs and cats to transmit certain

diseases, requiring owners to take extra precautions. (The HSUS, in fact, recommends that exotic animals *not* be kept as pets.) Likewise, puppies and kittens may be more susceptible to disease and prone to play-oriented nipping and scratching. And new pets may come with incomplete or unknown medical histories. This does not mean that you have to give up your playful puppy or can't get a new pet. It simply means that you need to rely on a veterinarian or animal shelter adoption counselor to advise you on appropriate pet selection and care.

No pet is guaranteed to be or remain disease-free. But your veterinarian can suggest preventive guidelines to keep your pet healthy, test your pet for parasites and other problems, and provide medical care to help a sick pet recover. And you can minimize risks for you and your pet by keeping your animal indoors, making sure he's well fed and groomed, and taking him to the veterinarian for vaccinations and annual checkups.

## What Can I Do to Protect Myself?

If you have a compromised immune system, it will help to follow these precautions:

- Wash your hands after handling a pet.

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- Wear rubber gloves when changing a litter box or cleaning up after a pet, and wash your hands afterwards.
- Keep your pet's nails short to minimize scratches.
- Follow your veterinarian's advice on keeping your pet free of fleas and ticks.
- Keep your pet indoors and use a leash outdoors to prevent your pet from hunting, scavenging, fighting, and engaging in other activities that expose him to other animals and disease.
- Feed your pet commercial pet food.
- Keep your pet's living and feeding areas clean.
- Keep your pet's vaccinations up to date.
- Seek veterinary care immediately for a sick pet.

## How Can I Meet My Pet's Basic Needs?

If your condition makes everyday pet care too challenging, you'll need to find outside assistance to make sure your pet gets the food, grooming, exercise, and general care he needs. When relatives, friends, and neighbors can't help, a nonprofit pet assistance organization may be able to lend a hand. Typically, these organizations help HIV-infected pet owners by providing everything from emergency foster care and animal transportation to dog walking, pet grooming, and litter box cleaning services.

If you can use this assistance, ask local veterinarians, animal shelters, physicians, health care clinics, social service agencies, veterinary schools, and libraries to refer you to resources in your community.

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