

SCIENCE & WELLNESS

Living With Pets May Improve the Health of Your Baby

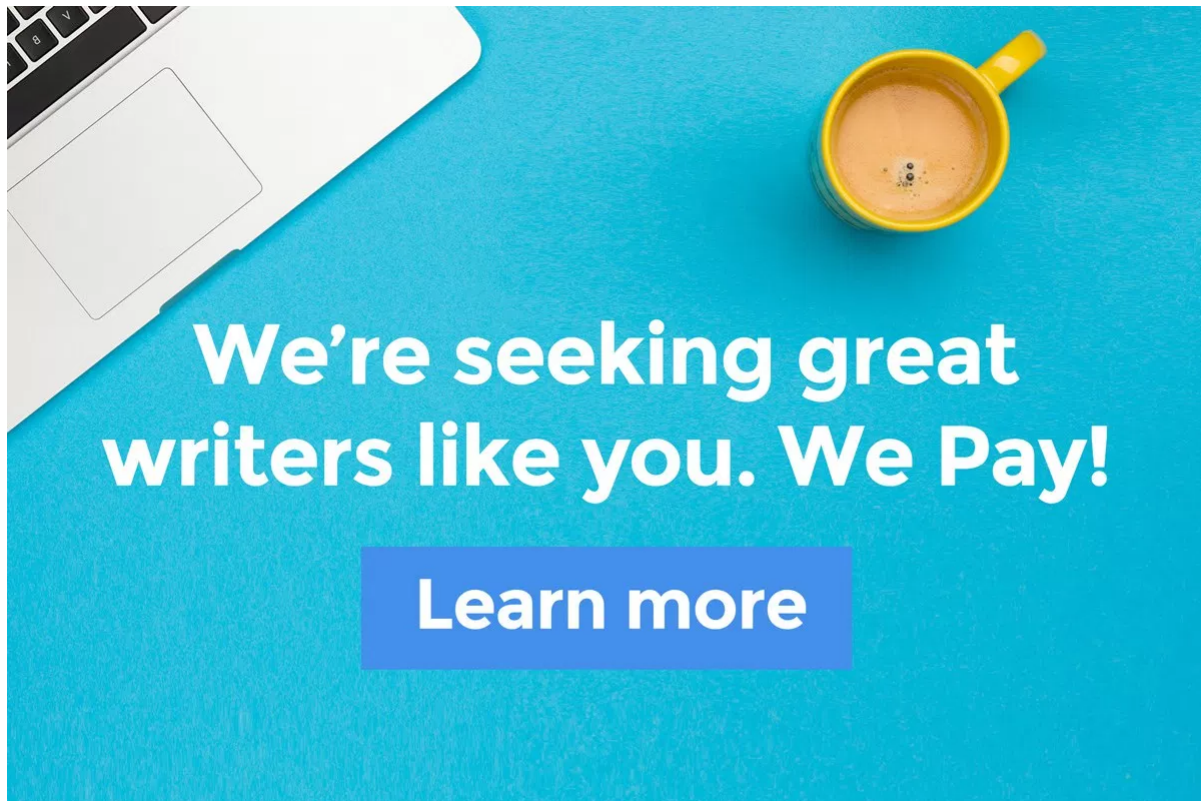
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Pets are often to blame for allergies. But a new study conducted at the University of Alberta in Canada has revealed that exposure to furry pets at a young age can actually safeguard children against both allergies and obesity.

This is possible because immunity builds up naturally as infants are exposed to the dirt and bacteria from the pet's fur and paws, even if parents only had the pet while the mother was pregnant.



A team of epidemiologists analyzed the fecal matter of 746 Canadian children at age 3.3 months who were part of the Canadian Healthy Infant Longitudinal Development Study (CHILD) study, which recruited expectant mothers during their pregnancies in between 2009 and 2012. Participating mothers were asked to report on household pet ownership during the second or third trimester and three months after they gave birth.

More than half of the infants in this group were exposed to at least one furry pet in their home while they were in the womb and/or up to three months after they were born. About 70 percent of the pets in the study were dogs.

The results showed that babies from families who had pets in the house were more likely to have higher levels of Ruminococcus and Oscillospira bacteria in their gut. Both of these microbes are associated with lower body mass index and reduced childhood allergies because the microbes train the immune system to react to harmful entities like pathogens. In fact, the abundance of these two bacteria doubled when there was a pet in the house.

Even children who have never lived with a pet can still have higher levels of these bacteria. While babies are in their mother's womb, they can be indirectly exposed to pet bacteria, with the microbes passing from pet to mother to baby. This means a child can get the benefits of the microbes even if the pet was taken out of the house before the baby was born.

Additionally, the findings of the study indicate that pet exposure could cut down the risk by about 80 percent of group B strep developing in newborns born vaginally. This bacteria can unfortunately lead to blood infection, pneumonia, or meningitis in newborns. Doctors typically treat against group B strep by giving mothers antibiotics during the delivery process, but this new option for preventing it from forming is quite promising.

This finding is consistent with other research highlighting that exposure to small amounts of friendly bacteria when children are young can help make them less susceptible to developing health problems later, like asthma.

But what if you do not want to own and care for a pet? Your children may still be able to reap the benefits of this scientific link between exposure to pets and a reduction in childhood obesity and allergies. Scientists may be able to create a pill – cleverly referred to as a “dog in a pill” – to capture and deliver the microbial benefits that pets naturally provide to children.

Stay tuned for more information on this possible remedy.



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