PWAs' Best Friend

Got a dog or cat? Want one? Check out these guidelines for safer petting.

March 1, 1999 By Bob Lederer

Pets feed the soul. Whether furry or feathery, slimy or scaly, creatures are crucial to the well-being of humans—they offer companionship, unconditional love and a beguiling otherness in the best and worst of times. No one knows this better than HIVers (see People, Their Pets and Pet Peeves). But people with beat immune systems have long been warned it's a mixed bag that the cat's in: Your feline friend—and other disease-carrying animals—may prove harmful to your health. Well, it's time for the hand-wringing to stop. The truth is, most pets pose little peril. So wipe off your sweaty palms and prepare to tackle that litter box. According to most experts, basic hygiene should keep you from picking up any nasty animal germs. Even toxoplasmosis—that 900-pound gorilla of diseases that PWAs can acquire from animals—can be avoided with practical precautions such as wearing gloves while cleaning the kitty litter box and washing your hands afterward. And remember, there's no evidence that nonprimates such as dogs and cats can contract HIV from humans—so give your pet all the messy lovin' you want.

For worrywarts, the following check list—adapted from the just-defunct Pet Owners With HIV/AIDS Resource Service—offers 10 simple steps for clean and safe pet care. Also helpful is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "Opportunistic Infections and Your Pets," a list of guidelines. Most advice is good old common sense, but a reminder never hurts.

1. As a general rule, wash your hands frequently, especially before eating, smoking or attending to open wounds.
2. Keep your pet's eating and living quarters clean.
3. Keep your pet clean and well groomed. Dogs should be bathed regularly. If allergies or respiratory problems are a concern, consider keeping your dog's coat short.
4. Change your cat's litter box daily. Avoid keeping it in the kitchen or in an especially warm, dry spot, such as near a radiator.
5. Keep your cat off kitchen surfaces. If this isn't possible, use a gentle disinfectant to wipe down any surface on which food may be placed.
6. Try to avoid unnecessary contact with your pet's bodily fluids including vomit, feces, urine and saliva. Gloves should be worn if a mess must be cleaned up.
7. Keep your pet's nails well trimmed. If you don't know how, ask your groomer or veterinarian to show you.
8. Try to avoid allowing your pet to lick any open wound.
9. Make every effort to eliminate vermin such as mice (possible carriers of toxo), flies and

cockroaches. Fleas should be attended to immediately. Remember, you must simultaneously eliminate fleas (and eggs) both on your pet and in your home.

10. Animal bites should be treated immediately. Rinse with cold water and disinfect with a solution such as Betadine. Consult your physician.

Here are a few additional pointers for those who have a pet or are thinking about getting one:

- Keep vaccinations current.
- Don’t feed your animal raw or undercooked meats.
- Don’t allow your animal to drink from the toilet or eat its own or another animal’s feces.
- Don’t allow your animal to hunt or eat other animals. Cats, for instance, may catch toxoplasmosis from rodents; attach bells to the cat’s collar to warn potential prey.
- Older animals are generally more disease free and safer than puppies, kittens and other young pets.

Sad to say, these animals should probably be avoided by HIVers:

- Reptiles (turtles, snakes, lizards) can carry salmonella bacteria all over their bodies.
- Farm animals such as chickens and ducks.
- Wild animals and birds.
- Monkeys and other nonhuman primates are particularly risky because of their close genetic relationship to humans.

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