



Effects of Animal-Assisted Therapy on Nutrition Through Changes in Brain Hormones

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Expectations for nutritional aspects of complementary/alternative medicine

Complementary and alternative therapies are those used alongside or in place of conventional Western medicine. These therapies include a variety of treatments that provide alternatives to traditional approaches. In terms of oral intake, they include dietary therapy as well as herbal medicine, supplements and health foods. When properly incorporated, such therapies can improve nutritional status and help maintain health and they are sometimes used to support overall well-being. One complementary/alternative therapy is animal-assisted therapy, which promotes emotional healing and reduces stress through interaction with animals. Nutrition and animal-assisted therapy are indirectly linked. By reducing stress, animal-assisted therapy may help improve stress-related appetite changes and digestive disorders.

Effects and evidence of animal-assisted therapy

While many complementary and alternative therapies lack firmly established scientific evidence, we have obtained meaningful results using objective, quantitative data on animal-assisted therapy. We examined the effects of this therapy on autonomic nervous activity in healthy adults, older adults, patients with terminal cancer and healthy preschool children [1-3]. Changes in the R-R spectrum of the electrocardiogram and salivary components (amylase and cortisol) during therapy demonstrated stress reduction and relaxation and also suggested reduced environmental stress.

Previous studies have additionally reported reductions in pain. One implication of these findings is the influence on brain hormones. Animal-assisted therapy promotes the secretion of serotonin, oxytocin, dopamine and endorphins [2]. Nutritional benefits include improved mood, increased appetite and greater nutrient intake. Therefore, animal-assisted therapy supports mental health, which can ultimately lead to better nutrition and overall health.

The nutritional benefits of animal-assisted therapy

Having a pet and interacting with animals also provides positive nutritional effects. To increase serotonin—the 'happiness hormone'—a balanced diet rich in tryptophan (e.g. soy products, dairy products, eggs, bananas) is recommended, along with vitamin B6 (found in fish, meat, bananas, nuts), which is required for converting tryptophan into serotonin and carbohydrates (such as rice and oatmeal). However, the motivation to consume these foods—mental factors such as appetite and willpower—is essential. Animal-assisted therapy, which can positively influence these factors, is valuable for healthy and ill adults. Nutrition plays a critical role in physical health and also in mental well-being. In daily life, good nutrition contributes to a richer mental state and animal-assisted therapy can help support this.

Issues to explore

- Establish evidence regarding the effectiveness of all alternative therapies.
- An exploratory investigation linking nutrition from a broad perspective.