

# Pets and Their Immune Compromised Owners

## INTRODUCTION

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Anyone who's ever lived with animals will tell you that the unconditional love and acceptance that person's received is like no other. For someone with a suppressed immune system, this unconditional love and friendship can be tremendously important.

While there are a number of diseases we can contract from our pets, if your pet is healthy, the potential risks of animal companionship to immune compromised people are minimal. Generally, the benefits of animal companionship outweigh the risks of not having a pet at all. Pets can, for instance, help lower blood pressure and relieve stress.

Below are some tips for owning a pet if you have a compromised immune system.

## IS IT DANGEROUS FOR AN IMMUNE COMPROMISED PERSON TO OWN A PET?

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Zoonotic infections are infections that can be shared by both animals and people (such as salmonella and ringworm). People with compromised immune systems are more likely to contract zoonotic infections through water, soil, contaminated food or even other people rather than from their pets. Depending on the individual's situation, pet ownership can outweigh the risks.

## WHAT TYPES OF DISEASES CAN BE TRANSMITTED BY PETS?

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Some of the most common infections transmitted by animals are toxoplasmosis, salmonella, giardia, bartonella (aka cat scratch fever), and bordatella. However, most of these can be acquired by means other than pets.

## WHAT PRECAUTIONS SHOULD AN IMMUNE COMPROMISED PERSON TAKE WHEN INTERACTING WITH THEIR PETS?

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- Be sure to wash your hands often, especially before smoking or eating.
- Keep your pet clean and well groomed, including trimming nails and keeping a flea-free environment.
- Make sure your pet is spayed or neutered, and keep your pet's vaccinations current.
- Avoid contact with your pet's bodily waste, such as feces, urine, vomit, or saliva. In the event of an accident, clean with a disinfectant like bleach. Be sure to wash your hands thoroughly afterwards, wear gloves, or have someone who is not at risk clean up the mess.
- Keep your pets living and feeding areas clean.
- Never feed your pet raw foods or unpasteurized milk.
- Don't let your pet lick any wounds or your face.
- Don't let your pets do any sort of stool eating (either their own or other animals stool), and do not let your pet drink from the toilet bowl or root through the garbage.
- Be sure to tend to any animal bite wound immediately to help avoid infection. Rinse with cool running water. Then disinfect the bite wound with an iodine solution such as Betadine.
- Seek vet care immediately for any sick animal.
- Don't allow any hunting (especially in cats), and keep your dogs on leash during walks to prevent scavenging.
- Don't allow birds to fly free in the home to avoid droppings around the home.
- When cleaning litter boxes, aquariums and/or bird cages, wear face masks and rubber gloves.

## WHAT SHOULD AN IMMUNE COMPROMISED PERSON LOOK FOR IN A NEW PET?

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When adopting a new pet, look for adult pets; puppies and kittens are more likely to be infected with something than adult animals are. The medical history of a new pet will be sketchy at best, so be sure to have your vet look at any new pet you bring home. Be sure to have do fecal, FeLV and FIV testing before you expose your new cat to any other cat. Both FeLV and FIV positive cats have lowered immune systems and are more likely to become infected with illnesses than FeLV and FIV negative cats. Avoid bringing home stray animals, exotic animals, wild animals, animals with diarrhea, reptiles, and monkeys.

## WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR IN A VETERINARIAN AND HOW CAN A VET HELP WITH MY PET?

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Be sure to choose a veterinarian who is willing to provide expanded preventive health care for pets that live with immunocompromised people. Be aware that vet care to help fight against zoonotic illnesses may be more expensive than regular vet care.

However, thorough veterinary care can help provide valuable information about keeping your pet healthy. Additionally, your vet can help guide you in pet selection, care, appropriate food choices and feeding, as well as provide appropriate environmental management, and appropriate medical or surgical care for your pet.

## FURTHER INFORMATION.

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This brochure used the PAWS Safe Pet Guidelines as a resource. For further information, you can go to their website at <http://www.pawssf.org/>



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