Can Dogs Protect Kids' Against Common Childhood Illnesses?

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In the United States, families choose dogs as household pets more often than any other animal. Now, new findings from two studies presented at the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (ACAAI) Annual Scientific Meeting in Boston build on previous research that suggests early exposure to these furry friends may protect against childhood eczema and reduce asthma symptoms, Medical News Today reports.

For the first study, researchers wished to assess how expectant mothers' exposure to dogs before birth influenced their unborn children's risk of developing childhood eczema. (Scientists defined exposure as keeping at minimum one dog inside the house for at least one hour each day.)

Results revealed that by age 2 kids whose mothers were exposed to dogs during their pregnancy were at lower risk of developing eczema. However, when those youngsters reached age 10, the protective effects of prenatal dog exposure weakened.

In the second study, scientists examined the effects of two types of dog exposure on children with asthma. One trial exposed the kids in this group with a dog allergy to the protein that caused them to have that allergic reaction. The other test subjected the same set of youngsters to certain particles, such as bacteria, that a dog might carry.

Findings showed that those who were exposed to the particles from a dog experienced a reduction in their asthma symptoms. But when the children were introduced to the dog protein, signs of their respiratory illness increased. "There seems to be a protective effect on asthma of non-allergen, dog-associated exposures and a harmful effect of allergen exposure," said Po-Yang Tsou, MD, MPH, the study's lead author.

While the studies further demonstrated the possible health perks of exposure to dogs, scientists concluded that more research is needed to confirm that these animals can defend kids against childhood eczema and asthma.

Click here to learn whether pets can boost children's overall health.

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