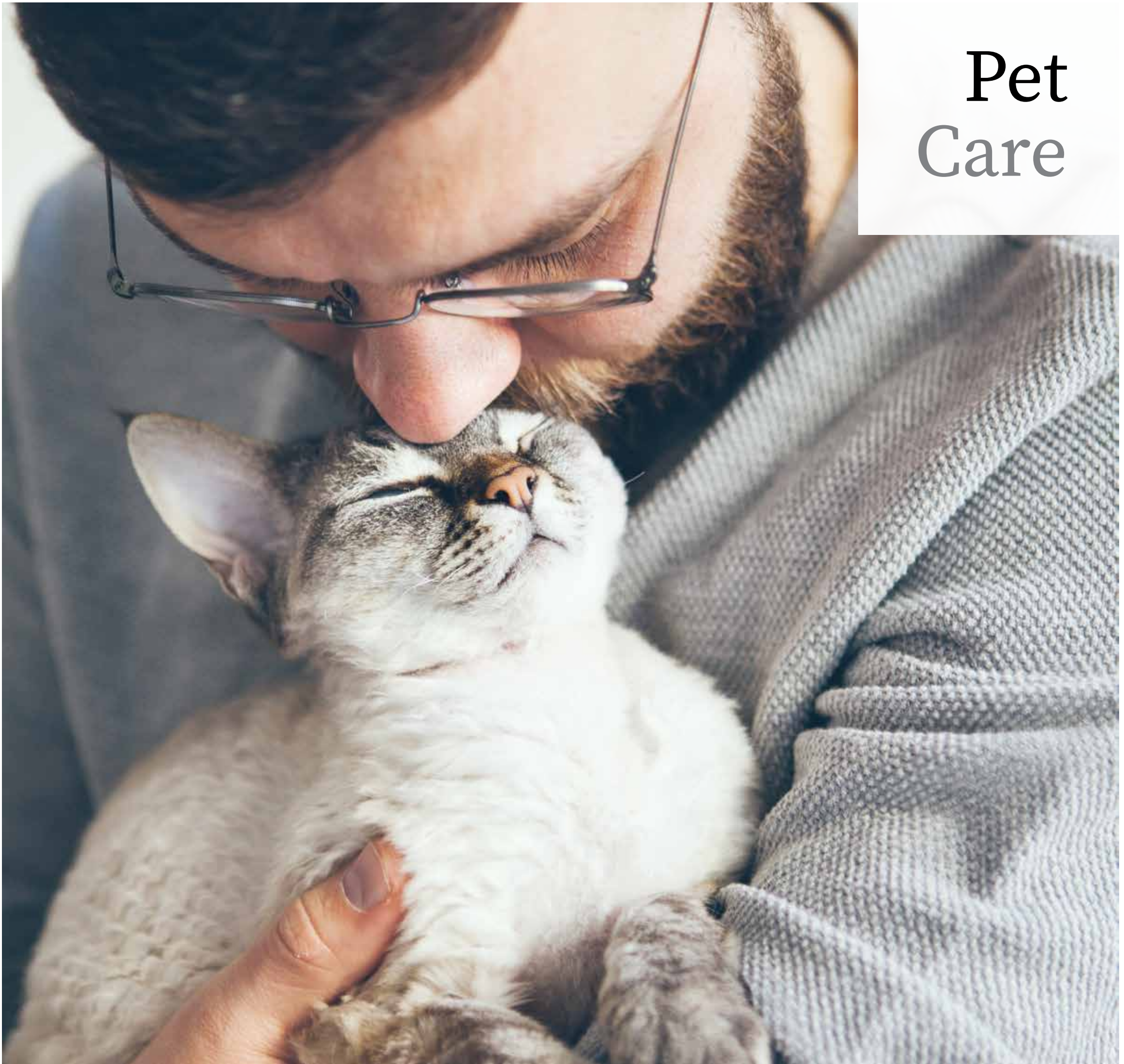


Pet Care



Pet Ownership Surges

Pet ownership is on the rise worldwide, with more than half of all households estimated to have at least one pet.

Families in the U.S., Brazil, the European Union and China alone account for over half a billion dogs and cats, according to HealthforAnimals, a global animal health association.

This growth is driven by several factors, including demographic shifts, economic development and increased awareness of the benefits pets bring to human health.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Millennial households are at the forefront of this surge. Often characterized by smaller family sizes and delayed childbearing, millennials are increasingly turning to pets for companionship. This generation's lifestyle choices have contributed significantly to the global increase in pet ownership.

Pet ownership among millennials and Gen Z also grew during the pandemic when people were home more often and had more time to spend with pets. Gen Z represents 14% of pet owners in the U.S., according to HealthforAnimals research, which is expected to contribute to a pet boom.

HEALTH BENEFITS OF PET OWNERSHIP

Beyond companionship, pets offer tangible health benefits to their owners. Studies have shown pet ownership can lead to improved heart health, lower levels of depression and anxiety and overall enhanced well-being. The human-animal bond plays a crucial role in promoting mental and physical health across diverse populations.



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Habri.org has even said U.S. health care costs reductions have been linked to pet ownership with owners experiencing better health and making fewer doctor visits. This may be because pets encourage a more active lifestyle and give people greater sensory stimulation and emotional support.

Another factor is that pet owners have a greater exposure to germs, which, in turn, can increase their gut health by creating a more active biome.

HEALTHIER PETS

According to industry researcher HealthforAnimals, pets have been experiencing better lives in recent years. Pets are living longer with some

living as much as 230% longer in some nations. In the U.S., the life expectancy of dogs increased from 10.5 years to 11.8 years. Housecats live twice as long as feral cats. Greater levels of vaccination and veterinary care has contributed to the longer life expectancy.

Pet owners are spending more money in pet care, often because they now have access to pet health insurance.

CHALLENGES TO RISE IN PET OWNERSHIP

While pet ownership is good for both the owners and the pets, there are some challenges society faces with the

pet boom. The biggest one is the shortage of veterinarians. In a recent 91-country survey, more than half of clinics reported an increase in their case load. More veterinarians are retiring than are graduating from vet schools. Meanwhile, Mars Veterinary Health says by 2030, the U.S. will need 55,000 additional vets to meet demand.

Another issue is that more people are abandoning pets. Up to eight million animals enter shelters and half of those are euthanized. That said, HealthforAnimals said while many people expected a crisis of abandoned animals after the pandemic pet boom, that has not taken place. Rehoming levels actually dropped in 2021.

Pets for First-Time Owners

Bringing home a pet for the first time is an exciting experience, but it can also feel overwhelming.

First-time pet owners often look for animals that are friendly, low-maintenance and easy to care for. While cats and dogs are popular choices, several small animals also make excellent companions, especially for those with limited space or experience.

These smaller animals can also make a great starter pet for families with younger children who can learn how to care for them while supervised by parents.

BETTA FISH

Colorful and easy to care for, betta fish are a popular choice for beginners. They can be housed alone in a small, filtered tank and require minimal daily upkeep. Unlike many fish, bettas do not need air pumps because they can breathe from the surface. While they don't offer physical interaction, their bright colors and graceful swimming make them a calming and beautiful presence.

RATS

Often misunderstood, domesticated rats are clean, intelligent and highly social animals. They can be trained to do tricks, enjoy cuddling with their humans and are usually very gentle. Rats thrive



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in pairs or small groups and enjoy toys, tunnels and time outside their cage with supervision. They are ideal for owners looking for an affectionate, interactive pet.

GUINEA PIGS

Friendly and vocal, guinea pigs are a great choice for children and adults alike. They rarely bite and enjoy gentle handling. Guinea pigs require a roomy cage, fresh hay, vegetables and daily interaction. They are social animals and do best with a

companion, so adopting a bonded pair is often recommended. With proper care, guinea pigs can live five to seven years.

CHINCHILLAS

Known for their incredibly soft fur and playful personalities, chinchillas are more independent but can be quite affectionate with regular handling. They are most active in the evening and require a dust bath several times a week to keep their coats clean. Chinchillas need a large,

well-ventilated cage and plenty of space to jump and climb. They are ideal for owners with patience and a quiet environment.

GERBILS

Gerbils are small, active rodents that are curious and fun to watch. They are less likely to bite than hamsters and tend to be more social with humans and each other. Gerbils are best kept in pairs or same-sex groups and need a secure tank or habitat where they can dig, chew and build

tunnels. Their care needs are relatively simple, making them a good fit for responsible older children or first-time adult owners.

Choosing a first pet is a personal decision. Each animal has unique needs and personalities, so it's important to research, consider your lifestyle and prepare for the responsibilities of pet ownership. Starting with a smaller, friendlier companion can help new owners build confidence and develop a lifelong love for animals.

Coping with the Loss of a Pet

For many people, pets are more than companions, they are family. The loss of a beloved animal can be a heartbreaking experience, often bringing deep grief, confusion and loneliness.

Unlike other forms of loss, the death of a pet may not always be recognized or understood by others. This can make grieving even more difficult, especially if friends or co-workers dismiss the depth of the bond or encourage someone to “just get another one.”

But mourning a pet is natural, and everyone processes it differently. Some may feel overwhelming sadness or guilt, while others may experience anger, numbness or even relief if the pet had been suffering. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.

UNDERSTANDING LOSS

Acknowledging the loss is a vital step in the healing process. Allow yourself time and space to feel the emotions that come, and don't be afraid to talk about your pet with those who understand. Sharing stories and photos can help keep their memory alive and remind you of the joy they brought into your life.

Children may need special



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support when a pet dies. Be honest but gentle when talking with them. Avoid euphemisms like “went to sleep,” which can cause confusion or fear. Encourage them to express their feelings through drawing, storytelling or creating a small memorial.

The American Veterinary Medical Association encourages people to keep several things in mind when they are working through their grief. One is to realize the silence that replaces the noise and presence of a pet may seem

very loud and you may need to prepare for the flood of emotions that can cause. The other is that outside people may not understand the bond you have with your pet, but you can know that your grief is normal. They also warn that sometimes our head gets in the way of grieving and people try to rank their grief rather than give their grief the care and space that it needs.

HANDLING GRIEF

Many people find comfort in creating rituals to say

goodbye. This could be a memorial service, planting a tree, assembling a photo album or donating in the pet's name. These acts provide a sense of closure and a way to honor the pet's life.

If feelings of grief become overwhelming or persistent, it may help to speak with a counselor. Some therapists specialize in pet loss, and several national organizations offer hotlines, support groups and online resources specifically for grieving pet owners.

The decision of when, or

whether, to bring another pet into your life is deeply personal. Some people feel ready after a short time, while others may need months or years. A new pet will never replace the one that was lost, but when the time is right, it can bring healing and joy in a different way.

The pain of losing a pet reflects the love shared. Taking time to grieve, seek support and honor their memory can help pet owners move forward while cherishing the bond that will always remain.

Pet Safety During Celebrations

Holidays bring excitement, guests and festive traditions, but they can also pose serious hazards for pets.

From loud fireworks to toxic foods and tempting decorations, it's important to take extra precautions to keep pets safe during these high-risk times.

Make sure your pets experience the joys of holidays with you and not anxiety or injury.

FOURTH OF JULY

Independence Day is one of the most dangerous holidays for pets. Fireworks can trigger severe anxiety, causing animals to run away in fear. According to DVM 360, there is a 30%-60% increase in lost pets brought into animal shelters and control facilities from July 4-6.

Avoid giving pets leftover barbecue food, as fatty meats and bones can cause digestive issues or choking hazards. Lighter fluid, matches and citronella products are also toxic if ingested.

The American Veterinary Medical Association recommends leaving pets at home when you go to parties or parades, ask guests you host to keep an eye on your pets so they don't escape, keep pets inside if neighbors are setting off fireworks, don't let pets get near the BBQ grill and keep sparklers, glow sticks,



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charcoal and kabob skewers away from pets.

HALLOWEEN

The combination of costumes, candy and repeated doorbell ringing can be overwhelming for pets.

Keep cats and dogs in a quiet room away from trick-or-treaters to prevent escape or anxiety. Costumes on pets should only be used if they are comfortable and do not restrict movement, vision or breathing.

Chocolate, xylitol (a common sugar substitute) and raisins are all toxic to pets. Even small

amounts can be dangerous, so keep all candy and wrappers out of reach. If you suspect your pet has eaten something harmful, contact a veterinarian immediately.

Protect your pet from other potentially harmful items such as lit candles, jack-o-lanterns, Halloween decorations, glow sticks and batteries.

THANKSGIVING

This food-focused holiday brings many potential hazards. Turkey bones can splinter and cause internal damage, and fatty table scraps may lead to

pancreatitis.

Avoid feeding pets seasoned foods, onions, garlic or anything containing alcohol. Dough with yeast can expand in a pet's stomach, and desserts with chocolate or nutmeg are toxic.

If guests are visiting, ensure pets have a quiet place to rest, especially if they are easily stressed by noise or unfamiliar people.

WINTER HOLIDAYS

Decorations, rich foods and festive plants all pose risks during December celebrations.

Tinsel and ribbon can be choking hazards, and holiday plants like poinsettias, holly and mistletoe can be toxic if eaten.

Keep lit candles out of reach and secure trees to prevent tipping. Cover or hide electrical cords to deter chewing. Cold weather can affect pets. Short-haired or elderly animals may need extra warmth during winter walks, and salt or de-icing chemicals can irritate paws.

Being mindful of seasonal risks can help your pets enjoy the holidays safely by your side and keep your celebrations worry-free.

Safely Handling Food and Treats

Pet owners go to great lengths to keep their furry companions healthy, but one area often overlooked is the proper handling of pet food and treats.

Safe storage and handling practices can help prevent illness not just in pets, but also in the people who care for them.

Whether feeding dry kibble, wet food or a raw diet, treat pet food with the same caution as human food. Improper handling can lead to the spread of bacteria such as salmonella or listeria, which can cause serious illness in both animals and humans, especially children, older adults and people with weakened immune systems.

Start by washing your hands with soap and water before and after handling pet food or treats. This simple step reduces the risk of cross-contamination, particularly if you're preparing your own food shortly before or after feeding your pet.

HANDLING PET FOOD

Store dry pet food in a cool, dry place with the bag sealed tightly or kept in an airtight container. If you use a separate container, keep the original bag or write down the lot number and expiration date in case of recalls. Refrigerate wet food after opening and use within a few days,

following the manufacturer's instructions.

Use a clean scoop or spoon to serve pet food, never your hands. Don't allow young children to scoop or serve pet food unless supervised, and be sure they wash up afterward.

Handle treats and chews carefully. Keep them sealed when not in use, and avoid feeding expired or visibly

spoiled treats. If your pet leaves half-eaten treats lying around, dispose of them promptly to avoid attracting pests or bacteria.

For households that use raw or homemade pet diets, additional precautions are essential. Prepare food on clean surfaces, keep raw meat separate from other ingredients, and wash all utensils and

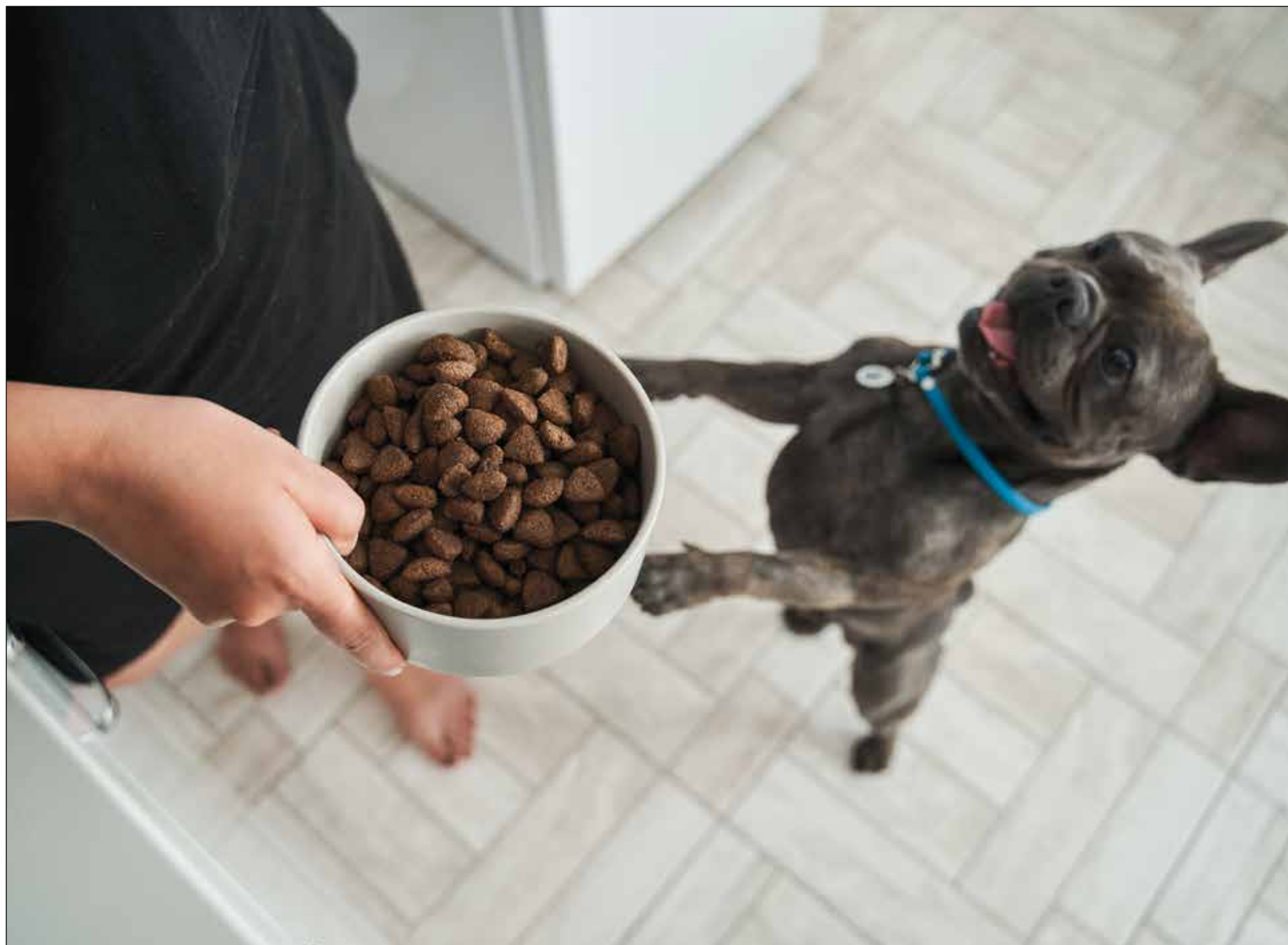
containers thoroughly after use. Avoid feeding raw meat on carpeted areas or soft surfaces that are hard to clean.

KEEP DISHES CLEAN

Clean your pet's food and water dishes daily with hot, soapy water. Let them air dry or dry with a clean towel. Regular cleaning helps prevent the buildup of biofilm and

bacteria that can make pets sick. If your pet experiences vomiting, diarrhea or a loss of appetite, consult a veterinarian, especially if symptoms follow a change in diet or new treats.

Being mindful about how you store, serve and clean up pet food can go a long way in protecting the health of everyone in the household.



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Microchipping Pets

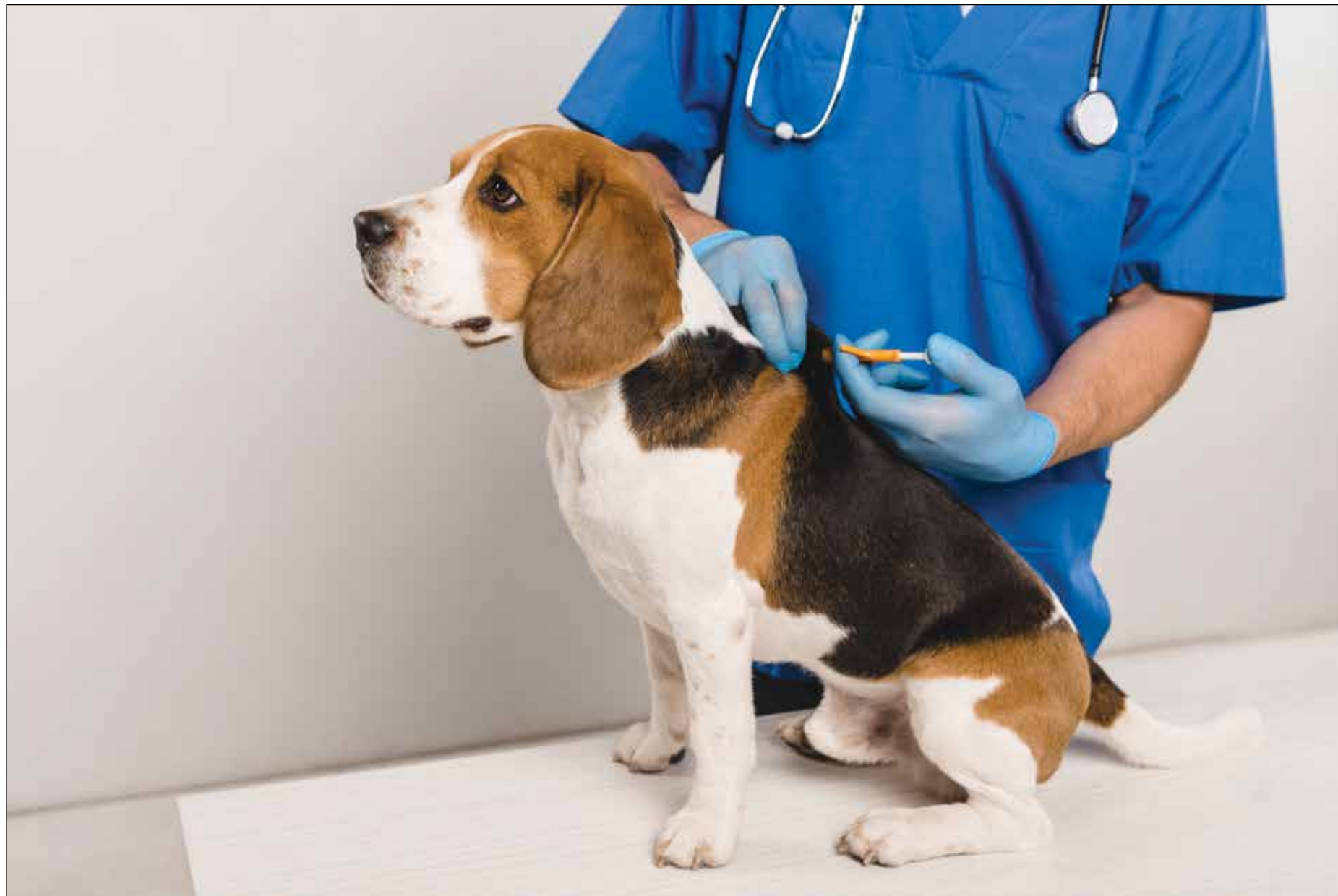
Pet owners use many tools to keep their animals safe — collars, tags, fenced yards and even GPS devices. But one of the most effective and permanent ways to help lost pets return home is through microchipping.

A microchip is a small device, about the size of a grain of rice, implanted just under a pet's skin, usually between the shoulder blades. Each chip contains a unique identification number that can be read by a scanner at a veterinary office, animal shelter or by animal control officers.

Unlike a collar or tag, a microchip can't fall off or be removed. While it doesn't provide real-time tracking, it can link a lost pet to its registered owner through a national database.

Microchipping is a quick procedure that can be done during a routine visit to the veterinarian. The cost typically ranges from \$25 to \$70. Some animal shelters and community clinics offer discounted or even free microchipping events.

After the chip is implanted, the pet owner must register the number with a pet recovery database and keep their contact information current. This step



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is essential. Without accurate details, the microchip won't help reconnect a found pet with its family. Microchips do not have a GPS and can't be used to find a lost pet.

Statistics from the American Veterinary Medical Association show a sharp increase in return-to-owner rates for microchipped animals compared to those without chips. Pets with microchips are significantly more likely to be reunited with their families

after being lost.

In the AVMA study, dogs were more than twice as likely to be returned to their owners if they had a microchip. The most common reason microchipped pets are not returned to their owner when taken to a shelter is because the telephone number recorded with the microchip registry database was either incorrect or disconnected. Owners need to keep their contact information up to date.

Microchipping is recommended for both dogs and cats, including those kept primarily indoors. Even indoor pets can slip out unexpectedly, especially during storms, emergencies or when guests come and go.

While microchips do not replace traditional ID tags, they provide an important backup in case a collar breaks or is removed. Animal shelters and veterinary clinics routinely scan for chips when a stray

animal is brought in, making microchipping a key part of pet recovery efforts. Microchipping is a one-time procedure that lasts for the life of the pet. The chip does not require batteries or ongoing maintenance.

For those who want to go the extra mile in protecting their pets, microchipping offers a simple, affordable and highly effective safeguard. It's a small investment that can provide peace of mind and, in many cases, a happy reunion.

Finding the Right Pet

Bringing a pet into the home is a long-term commitment that can bring joy, companionship and structure to daily life. But choosing the right animal — and the right breed or species — takes thoughtful planning and a clear understanding of your household's needs.

Not all pets are a good fit for every person or family. Selecting the right one depends on several factors, including time availability, space, energy level, budget and lifestyle.

Start by considering the amount of time you can devote to a pet each day. Dogs, especially puppies, need daily walks, social interaction and training. Cats tend to be more independent but still require attention, stimulation and routine care. Small animals like rabbits, guinea pigs or hamsters can be lower maintenance but still need a clean habitat and daily interaction.

Next, look at your living space. Apartment dwellers may prefer small pets that don't need a yard, while homeowners with fenced yards might have more flexibility. Some dog breeds thrive in active outdoor environments,



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while others are better suited to indoor living. Cats, reptiles and caged animals generally adapt well to indoor settings but still need enrichment and proper space.

Think about energy levels, both yours and the pet's. High-energy dogs such as border collies or huskies need frequent exercise and mental stimulation. A laid-back breed like a bulldog or a senior cat may be a better match for a quieter household. If you have

children, research breeds known for being gentle and tolerant.

Budget is another important consideration. The cost of food, veterinary care, grooming and supplies can vary widely between pets. Large dogs may eat more and require more expensive medications, while exotic pets often have specialized care needs.

Allergies are another factor to consider. Spend time around different animals to

see whether anyone in the household has a reaction. Hypoallergenic breeds may reduce symptoms for some people, but no pet is entirely allergen-free.

Rescue organizations and shelters can be valuable resources for finding the right fit. Many offer behavior assessments, background information and adoption counseling to help match pets with appropriate homes. Some even allow trial periods or fos-

tering opportunities.

Ultimately, the best pet is one whose needs align with your own. A careful match can lead to years of companionship and joy. Rushing into a decision, on the other hand, can create stress for both pet and owner.

Taking the time to research, ask questions and evaluate your lifestyle helps ensure your new pet will be a beloved addition, not an overwhelming one.