

## Why Cat Owners Should All Be Penalized

(For Causing Healthcare Costs to Rise)

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Hi. I'm Art Caplan, speaking to you from the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania. Today I want to talk about a very serious healthcare problem: irresponsible behavior on the part of a lot of Americans that isn't getting much attention, and that means you if you own a cat.

Many types of health costs are associated with cat ownership. We have allergies and asthma, people who wind up going to the hospital because they have allergic reactions either to the cat or the medicine they take, and there are all types of skin problems. The list goes on and on.

It is pretty clear that these miserable mousers are a huge healthcare problem. I started thinking about this when I saw a recent poll that was published in *Forbes* magazine that said that most Americans believe that there ought to be a tax on people who are overweight. They make a lifestyle choice and wind up causing more healthcare costs for everybody else due to the diseases and ailments linked to obesity, so Americans think they should pay more. By the way, their employers are starting to think that as well, that they should start to levy penalties and fines on people who are overweight at the workplace.

All of which takes me back to the issue of cats. If we are going to put a penalty on lifestyle choices, then shouldn't we penalize all lifestyle choices? If cats are really causing healthcare problems in the way that I think they do, then I think we need to be fair and tax cat owners.

If you look at the situation, there are probably 60 million or more Americans who own a cat. A lot of you out there choose to own more than one. Many of you have a cat and you actually keep children in the house near this cat, so these are all horrible, terrible, inappropriate, and immoral decisions.

Why? Well, we don't know exactly how much cat ownership costs, but it probably runs into billions of dollars every year in terms of allergy medicines that people take, hospitalizations that I mentioned earlier, and treating skin diseases. You are also



exposing others who don't want to own a cat to cats because you can never get the cat dander and the cat allergen out of the rug, the furniture, and the carpet. Even if you move the cat, so to speak, the presence of the cat is left behind. This is a very burdensome thing, not just for people who live with cats but the rest of us who try to visit you or who want to move into a place where you have been.

Therefore, it is pretty clear -- probably beyond any ethical dispute -- that cat ownership is an irresponsible choice. Let me add that none of this applies to dogs. I own a dog. I think they are wonderful. In fact, there probably should be a tax break for dog owners. But for cats, looking at the kinds of costs that are involved and the irresponsibility that cat owners exercise in choosing to have them, I think we need to start thinking more seriously about ways to extend penalties if we are going to make personal responsibility a part of healthcare.

Cat owners, think hard about what I said. And those of you who are in favor of personal responsibility as a way to cut down healthcare costs, you know who I am talking about.

This is Art Caplan at the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania. I wish all of you a happy summer.

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