

Pets and the Elderly

How do companion animals help improve the lives of older people?

A research summary prepared by Petcare Information and Advisory Service



The role of pets in the lives of the aged is particularly significant for those who live in a nursing home or in some situation of assisted care. Numerous studies show pets provide one of the few interventions capable of permanently lifting the atmosphere of hospices and nursing homes. Despite all this evidence, many nursing homes still do not allow pets, and fear of giving up their animal companion is a serious concern for many in the community. For older people still living in their own home, pet ownership has many benefits including social facilitation and companionship as well as increased activity levels.

- An intervention study using animal-assisted therapy (AAT) was conducted by Richeson et al to measure the effects on the subjective well-being of 37 nursing home residents. The residents, with no recorded cognitive impairments (mean age 82.5 years) were randomly assigned to 1 of 3 groups: control, AAT, or student visitors. The AAT group showed statistically significant increases in overall satisfaction with life when compared to the control and student-visitors groups, and statistically significant increases on the feelings 'enthusiastic', 'attentive', 'interested', and 'inspired' when compared to the control group.¹
- An Australian study by Patricia Crowley found that 18 months after acquiring a Whippet, residents of a nursing home had reduced tension and confusion and reported less fatigue.²
- Associate Professor of Nursing at the University of Michigan, Mara Baun, has demonstrated that pets can induce a social response from people with advanced Alzheimer's disease, even those who do not respond to people.³
- In a German longitudinal study of 225 occupants in nursing homes, half the group were given pet budgerigars. The conclusion six weeks later was that "budgerigars can effectively intervene in processes of aging, not only delaying deficitary processes, but also increasing the physical, social and psychological quality of life in old age."⁴
- A study of a dog in a hospice showed that patients spent less time alone than before the dog arrived, and staff members reported it gave everyone something to talk about.⁵
- A substantial Canadian study by Professor Parminder Raina of 1,054 elderly citizens aged over 65 revealed pet owners are more able to maintain activities of daily living (ADL) over a one year period. Dogs in particular help keep people active and provide a routine and a reason to get up in the morning.⁶
- Similar findings came from a Japanese study which investigated the relationship between pet ownership and the level of daily activity (used as a measure of general health) in elderly women living at home. They found that there was a positive correlation between pet ownership and the level of instrumental activity of daily living (IADL). Saito et al concluded that it is possible that keeping a companion animal may be linked to better overall health in the elderly.⁷
- In one American study of elderly persons who had recently lost a spouse, pet ownership and strong attachment to pets were associated with significantly less depression. Pets appear to provide a powerful buffering effect against grief and stress.⁸
- Another US study of widows found non pet owners reported deterioration in health after the death of a spouse, whereas pet owners did not.⁹

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Research indicates that people over the age of 65 are the least likely age group in the community to own a pet. Yet, in many ways they are the age group that has the most to gain from pet ownership. Better solutions are needed to ensure older people can enjoy the many benefits pets provide.

References

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