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Pet Companionship for Older Adults:

How Interacting with Animals
Can Improve Your Physical,
Social, & Emotional Health



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Kendal at Home Member Mim has always loved animals. Formerly a clinical social worker and psychotherapist, Mim saw the calming affects her dog had on her clientele.

“I was a psychotherapist in a mental health center when I started taking my dog to work with me,” Mim says. “She was such a good dog, and everybody loved her. She loved to go. She was very good with my clients. If they were upset, she could come out of a sound nap and go over to them to be petted.”

Mim experienced a similar phenomenon years earlier when she took her male English Mastiff therapy dog to visit local hospital patients. “The nurse would go into the room and say, ‘There is a dog here with his owner. Would you like to see him?’ My big old dog would go into the hospital room, and he’d put his big old head on the hospital bed, and they’d pet his head for hours,” Mim says. “Sometimes they would cry when we left. They were so responsive to just being able to pet a friendly dog. It was a lovely experience, and we went often.”

Now 80 years old, Mim is experiencing all the benefits a pet can bring in her dog Sam. “I have a bad back, and walking is kind of difficult, but I have to take my dog out. I’m walking at least twice a day with the dog. It provides exercise that I may not do otherwise,” she says. **“By being my friends, by being my responsibilities, my pets have enriched my life.”**

In the following pages, we examine positive benefits of pet ownership for older adults, especially for older adults in therapeutic settings, and provide information on pet adoption later in life.



Positive Benefits of Pet Interaction for Healthy Older Adults

Older adults who have owned animals previously or (own them now!) undoubtedly know their pet companions make them feel good. But you may be surprised at just how many ways a pet can improve your health.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there are numerous health benefits to owning a pet:

- Pets Can Decrease Your
 - Blood Pressure
 - Cholesterol Levels
 - Triglyceride Levels
 - Feelings of Loneliness
- Pets Increase Your Opportunities for Exercise and Socialization
- Pets Can Improve Older Adults' Health
 - Physically
 - Emotionally
 - and Socially.



Physical Health

People who own dogs tend to be **more physically active and less obese** than those who don't, according to WebMD. Adults 65 or older who do not have limiting health conditions need at least two hours and 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity every week, according to the CDC. Taking a dog for a daily brisk 30-minute walk or two 15-minute walks means older adults exceed that requirement. Plus, playing fetch in the backyard after a walk can help an older adult work major muscle groups like the arms, shoulders, legs, and hips.

Similarly, walking the dog can **help keep bones strong**, defending against osteoporosis and painful fractures. "Walking is a weight-bearing exercise that strengthens your bones and the muscles around you," WebMD states. "It also lets you spend time in the sun, which provides vitamin D."

If you already have osteoporosis, you can still take your dog for a walk—you simply need to take a few precautions to guard against falls. "Use a short leash that won't get tangled. And don't walk a dog that is liable to jump on you and make you lose your balance," WebMD advises.

Improved heart health is another potential physical benefit of interacting with animals for older adults. According to Animal Planet, both the CDC and the National Institute of Health (NIH) have conducted heart-related studies on people with pets.



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In one study of 240 married couples, pet owners had lower blood pressure and lower heart rates during rest than people who did not own a pet. The same was true of stockbrokers with high blood pressure who adopted a cat or dog in another study.

This means pet owners are less likely to have a heart attack down the road. For those who have already experienced a heart attack, studies show dog owners have better recovery rates and significantly better survival rates. Overall, WebMD suggests, pet owners have a lower risk of dying from any cardiac disease, including heart failure.

And finally, experts aren't sure why, but research indicates cat owners **have fewer strokes** than people who do not own cats. "Researchers speculate cats may have a more calming effect on their owners than other animals do," according to WebMD. "It may also have something to do with the personality of a cat owner. Cats often become the focus of their owner's interest, which diverts them from other stressful worries."



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Emotional Health

Speaking of stress, animals are proven to be one of the biggest (and furriest!) stress busters. It takes just a few minutes of playing with a dog or cat or watching fish swim to feel less anxious and stressed. That's because observing animals naturally lowers cortisol, a hormone associated with stress, and boosts serotonin, a chemical associated with well being, according to WebMD.

"People in stress mode get into a 'state of dis-ease' in which harmful chemicals like cortisol and norepinephrine can negatively affect the immune system," says Blair Justice, PhD, psychology professor at the University of Texas School of Public Health on WebMD. "Like any enjoyable activity, playing with a dog can elevate levels of serotonin and dopamine – nerve transmitters known to have pleasurable and calming properties."

Beyond stress, interacting with animals has proven to be an effective alternative medicine treatment to help battle depression. "Therapists have been known to prescribe a pet as a way of dealing with and recovering from depression," WebMD states. "No one loves you more unconditionally than your pet, and a pet will listen to you talk as long as you want to talk."

Pets can be especially emotionally comforting to older adults who have recently lost a spouse or other loved one, which may explain why pet ownership increased 17.7 percent between 2006 and 2011 among people who were divorced, widowed, or separated, according to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).



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Social Health

One key to a healthy mind and body is staying engaged with others. And while community organizations and groups offer a variety of ways to be involved, many older adults struggle to spread their social wings.

Pets, especially dogs, can help older adults feel comfortable meeting new people because they are natural conversation starters. Think about it: What animal lover can pass a friendly looking dog without stopping to give him a pat on the head and quick chat with the owner?

This helps ease people out of social isolation or shyness says Nadine Kaslow, PhD, professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Emory University, on WebMD. “People ask about breed; they watch the dog’s tricks,” she says. “Sometimes the conversation stays at the ‘dog level;’ sometimes it becomes a real social interchange.”

And there are more places to take your dog to socialize than the sidewalk outside of your home! Animal Planet suggests you try mingling with your pet at training classes, dog parks, outdoor cafes, and even online pet-focused social networks like Petpop.com.



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Pet Therapy for Older Adults

For those with Special Health Needs

The use of pets in medical settings dates back more than 150 years, according to National Public Radio (NPR), but it was in the 1970s that researches started to uncover the scientific connection between animals and their impact on human health: “One of the first studies, published in 1980, found heart attack patients who owned pets lived longer than those who didn’t. Another early study found that petting one’s own dog could reduce blood pressure.”



Today, older adults with special health needs, like those with Alzheimer’s or those recovering from stroke or illness, continue to reap the benefits of pet therapy.

For example, some studies being done in hospitals and nursing homes show a relation between pet interaction and improved mood and reduced anxiety. And in other instances, visits from therapy dogs positively impact the psyche of patients recovering from devastating illness or medical event. “Some dogs are trained to understand a range of commands,” WebMD states, “which lets them help people with aphasia (a language disorder common in older adults, particularly those who’ve had a stroke) feel good when they see the dog understands them.”

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How Pet Therapy Benefits Older Adults

During any given week, six pet therapy dogs, ranging from Labradors to German Shepherds, can be found greeting older adults at Kendal at Oberlin, a retirement living community in Oberlin, Ohio. Additionally, three house cats live inside the Stephens Care Center.

“What we’re trying to do when we have animals that stay with us is support lifetime habits and relationships adults have with animals,” says Michele Tarsitano-Amato, board certified registered art therapist, dementia specialist, and director of creative arts therapy at Kendal at Oberlin. “Animals are very important, even if they’re just coming for visits.”

She recalls one of her favorite examples of the powerful bond between a resident and her pet companion: “We had a lovely lady who came through our process, and she had a cat she would walk around campus. When she needed assisted living, the cat moved with her to assisted living. When she could no longer take assisted care and needed skilled care, the cat moved with her to skilled care. We had high school student volunteers push her in a wheelchair, and the cat would be with her on a leash. The cat was able to be with her until her end.”

She continues: **“Pet therapy isn’t about getting a new pet for somebody because they moved into a care center. It’s about supporting the lifetime relationship older adults already have with their pets. That love bond is so strong. That comfort the animal gives to the owner is so important. It’s not something a caregiver can give all the time.”**

Michele’s dog Amber is among the visiting pooches. With the help of Fran, a Kendal at Oberlin resident and long-time animal lover, Amber performs tricks and lends a dutiful ear to those in the care center each Thursday. “One of the tricks Amber does, she gives five,” Fran says. “They seem to get chuckles out of that; they’re all smiles. It’s a very rewarding experience just having the residents share their emotions with me.”



Adopting a Pet Later in Life

Think you're ready to experience all the joys and benefits of pet ownership later in life? Michele and Fran say there are several factors you should consider before adopting or purchasing an animal:

- **Living Arrangement:** Where you live makes a big difference in the health and happiness of your pet. "I continue not to recommend getting a new pet in the care center," Michele says. "For those in independent living, adoption is a wonderful opportunity."
- **Foster vs. Own:** Adopting or purchasing an animal is a huge undertaking, especially if you've never owned an animal or if it's been several years since your last animal passed. That's why Michele suggests bringing animals into your home for a trial first or simply fostering animals.
- **Where to Find Pets:** "Some people do want to go for special breeds, and I can understand that," Fran says, "but if I were to suggest anything, I would say please rescue a dog or cat. They're waiting to be loved, and you get so much back in return. You can't measure it." Local dog rescues, such as PAWS, are always on the lookout for loving owners.
- **Physical Ability:** It's no secret some pets are easier to care for than others. To find the right pet for you, be honest about your physical ability. In many cases, this will dictate the type and breed of animal you should pursue. Remember, dogs rely on you entirely, Fran stresses.
- **Your Lifestyle:** Many older adults spend their retirement years traveling across the globe or migrating south in the colder months. Animals often do not fit nicely into your travel plans. "Right now my husband and I are busy traveling and doing things," Fran says. "I don't feel like I want to put my dog in a kennel."
- **Animal Age:** Young animals can be overwhelmingly energetic for any household – that's why Michele suggests looking for older animals. "It would be so lovely if the older adult would be willing to adopt an older pet," she says. "There are so many older dogs and cats that have lost their owners because their owners have passed. Those animals still need love, and they still need someone to care for them."



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Whether you choose to adopt, foster, or simply open your heart to the animals you meet in your neighborhood, the benefits of pet companionship can't be denied. Animals, especially pet therapy animals, can do wonders for your physical, emotional, and social health... no matter your age.



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