

Pets Benefit Seniors in So Many Ways!

A pet can be an amazing friend and companion for families and individuals of all ages, but the health and therapeutic benefits of animal ownership may be especially valuable to older adults. In addition to lots of unconditional love and affection, a pet may even help you live longer.

Research shows having a pet can:

- Increase opportunities for exercise
- Keep your mood elevated and reduce stress
- Decrease blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- Keep you engaged with your community and help prevent loneliness

Time for a Walk, Fido!

Physical activity is crucial for maintaining overall health, and taking care of a companion animal can motivate you to engage in more activities that will get you up and moving. Pet owners often are more active than their non-pet owning counterparts. A 2013 study found dog owners walked farther, walked more often, had better mobility and retained their independence longer than non-dog owners.

Lower Stress, Healthier Heart

There's only a modest amount of data to show a strong relationship between hypertension and pet ownership. However, mounting evidence proves owning a pet can change behaviors, which in turn often results in reduced stress levels and may even improve high blood pressure, high triglycerides and high cholesterol—all major risk factors for cardiovascular disease.

Various studies have shown that people who own pets have fewer cardiovascular risk factors. One study showed pet owners 60 and older had lower serum triglycerides—a type of fat found in the blood—than non-pet owners, and a study published in 'Hypertension' showed pet ownership can help lower blood pressure response due to mental stress.

Social and Mental Benefits

We all know the old saying that dogs are "man's best friend," but did you know there's scientific evidence to prove it? Pets not only encourage social connections by giving seniors a chance to interact with other pet owners, they can also stem feelings of loneliness or isolation.

Various studies have found mental health can be improved by pet interaction, and one 2011 study found the emotional benefits of pet ownership can mimic those of human friendship. Researchers found pet owners tended to be more conscientious, more extroverted and have a better overall sense of well-being; dog ownership specifically increased feelings of belonging, self-esteem and a meaningful existence.

Additionally, a 2013 study on pet therapy in elderly patients with dementia or psychiatric disorders showed improved communication and coping ability.

Pets Can Help Keep Seniors Independent

More and more seniors are finding that having a service dog helps them maintain their independence. Service animals are trained to help with many tasks—they can open doors, pick up dropped items and assist their owners up from a fall. Some are even trained to remind their owners when to take medication.

For those in assisted living residences, regular visits from therapy animals can make the day much brighter. One study showed feelings of loneliness were significantly decreased in long-term-care residents that interacted with therapy pets.

Source: healthwaysfit.com