

- Aging

## The connection between pets and health

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Could living with a pet help you in your later years? For animal lovers and some others, the answer could well be 'yes' as a few studies have shown that living with pets can increase life satisfaction and improve health.



One study of people in Germany and Australia found those who continuously own a pet are healthiest, visiting a doctor less often than non-pet owners.

More specifically, researchers have found a connection between pet ownership and reduced cardiovascular disease risk, lowered blood pressure and lower cholesterol.

Other research has suggested people with pets are less lonely, have stronger support networks and are more likely to be involved in community activities.

Ageing in place – that is, continuing to live in your home and community independently and comfortably – is associated with decreased depression and a closer connection to friends and family. "Family" for a lot of people includes their pets.

Companionship and affection are often the main reasons a person gets a pet, but they also provide valuable stimulation and a sense of purpose. This may be felt by pet owners as an easing of stress and anxiety, and an overall lifting of mood. Many retirement villages and aged care facilities have a house cat, dog or birds for this reason.

Dog walking has the bonus of being great exercise, although playing with any pets will help keep people active.

For some people, dogs will require too much exercise though.

The commitment involved in looking after an animal can also motivate people toward better health.

Age Concern Canterbury has previously noted that pets aid recovery from illness and hospitalisation because the determination of pet owners to get home to see their animals generates a stronger drive to rehabilitate.

Elderly people who own pets also tend to take better care of themselves, studies have shown. Having a pet adds routine to

the day with the need for regular feeding, watering, grooming, playing and exercise. This can be just the boost an older person needs to get up and be ready for the day, as well as a reason to stay up and participate in other activities.

A researcher at Queen's University in Canada said helping seniors care and provide for their animals is win-win for society.

She thought that for this reason, governments should consider supporting pet ownership for seniors by providing funding for people in financial need.

"Given the many quality-of-life and health-related benefits of pet ownership, developing community support programmes dedicated to keeping pets and older adults together is expected to result in savings to healthcare systems and social programmes," she said.

Pets aren't right for everyone, though. For some people, pet ownership can be stressful, expensive and even dangerous. Dogs in particular are more suitable for people in active retirement due to their need for exercise and socialisation.