

Pets and Older Adults

What are the benefits of having a pet?

Pet ownership offers many benefits for older adults. It can have a positive effect on both mental and physical health. Older adults who own pets feel less lonely, are less depressed, and are less likely to commit suicide. Animals can help you keep your mind off your problems. Pets can comfort you with touch and be a way to start conversations with other people. They can help you deal better with stress, grief, and loss. Pets may also help you feel safer and more secure. Older adults who own pets are more likely to recover from a heart attack. When people are around pets, their blood pressure tends to be lower. Pets can help you stay more active and be able to take better care of yourself. If you have chronic pain, a pet can help you focus on something other than your pain.

What else should I think about?

Pets can be costly, especially if you have a fixed income. When you are ready to pick out a pet, consider checking with the local animal shelter. Plan for the costs of shots, vet bills, neutering or spaying, and food. The animal shelter or a pet store should be able to give you an idea of what these costs will be for your pet. Some animal shelters participate in the Pets for the Elderly Foundation. It is a nonprofit organization that pays the fees charged by the shelter for adoption, shots, and spaying or neutering.

Do you have any allergies that you need to consider? Many people who are allergic to dogs or cats find that they are not allergic to animals like hamsters or birds. Besides providing love, joy, and comfort, pets can also mean fleas, chewing problems, soiled floors and carpets, and noise. It's best to be prepared for these things.

Think about your health and risks from exposure to animal diseases. People taking drugs that suppress the immune system need to be extra careful with pets.

It is also important to think about how much care the pet will need. Think about how active the pet must be to stay healthy. Will you be able to keep up? Dogs tend to be some of the friendliest and most loving animals, but they need a lot of care and attention. Dog breeds vary widely in their activity needs, so be careful in your choice of dog, in particular. Make sure you have the space you need for the kind and size of pet you choose. If you rent, check your rental policy to see if you are allowed to have pets.

Think about what might happen if you have to move for financial, health, or other reasons. Your pet might not be able to move with you. Having to give up a pet can cause a sense of loss and grief.

If you think you cannot manage a pet in your house or apartment, see about helping care for animals in a nearby zoo, animal shelter, farm, or nature preserve.

If you want to combine having a pet with a community service goal, and you have the time and fitness to manage it, you might consider sponsoring a service dog in

training (like a seeing-eye dog). For more information, contact Guide Dogs of America (<http://www.guidedogsofamerica.org>).

Pets may help older adults live longer, healthier, and more enjoyable lives. Most people find that there is some kind of pet that they enjoy and can afford. If you want to give a pet to an older friend or relative, talk it over with them first, and think about what to do if the person stops being able to care for the animal. It is also a good idea to discuss what might happen to a pet if the person moves to a place that does not allow pets.

For more information about the Pets for the Elderly Foundation, call 1-866-849-3598, or visit the Web site at <http://petsfortheelderly.org>.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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