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HEALTH BENEFITS OF PETS AS WE AGE

6 ways companion animals improve our well-being

March 27, 2025 – Pets have long been known for their companionship and unconditional love, but for older adults, the bond with a furry friend can offer even deeper benefits. From emotional support to physical well-being, pets play a significant role in enhancing life and living no matter the age.

1. Companionship and Emotional Support

One of the most valuable aspects of being a pet caregiver is the emotional connection it provides. As people age, they often experience loneliness due to the loss of friends, family, mobility restrictions or independence. Pets can help fill the void by offering constant companionship and reduce feelings of isolation.

Studies show that loneliness can be a significant issue for older adults, leading to feelings of isolation and depression. For seniors who may live alone or experience periods of emotional difficulty, pets offer comforting presence and help combat feelings of sadness, anxiety, and depression by boosting the natural chemicals in the brain that enhance happiness and well-being.

2. Physical Health & Activity

Having a pet encourages seniors to stay active and engage in regular physical activities. Spending time with pets can lower blood pressure, reduce the risk of heart disease, and even improve overall physical fitness through activities like walking and playing with pets. Dogs, in particular, need daily walks, which gives seniors an excuse to get outside and stay physically active. Even light exercise like playing with a cat, can improve circulation and boost overall health.

3. Sense of Purpose and Responsibility

Taking care of a pet instills a sense of routine and responsibility. For older adults who may have retired or have fewer obligations, the responsibility of caring for a pet can be a source of structure and purpose. Feeding, grooming, and providing regular attention to a pet creates a consistent daily routine, which helps seniors maintain a sense of responsibility and mental sharpness.

Pets are also incredibly dependent on their caregivers, and for seniors, this can be a fulfilling way to feel needed and appreciated. The act of caring for a pet often fosters a feeling of accomplishment and boosts self-esteem.

4. Social Connection

Older adults with pets are often more likely to interact with others. Pets can act as social bridges, helping their guardian connect with others who have similar interests. Whether it's meeting fellow dog owners at the park or discussing pet care with a neighbor, pets facilitate socialization and can help reduce the feelings of isolation that often affect older adults.

Additionally, some senior communities and nursing homes encourage pet ownership or even provide therapy animals to help improve residents' social interactions. Studies have found that having pets in these settings can lead to improved mood and even greater cooperation among residents.

5. Cognitive and Mental Stimulation

Caring for a pet can also provide cognitive stimulation. Pets require attention, care, and problem-solving, which can keep a senior's mind sharp. Whether it's learning new ways to train a pet, engaging in activities that require mental focus (like teaching tricks or playing games), or simply observing and understanding their pet's behavior, seniors' cognitive functions are often enhanced through the interactions.

For individuals with early-stage dementia or Alzheimer's disease, pets can also offer comfort and familiarity, helping to ease confusion or anxiety. Some studies have found that the presence of pets in senior care facilities reduces agitation and enhances the overall well-being of residents.

6. Increased Safety and Security

Pets, especially dogs, can provide a sense of security for older adults living alone. A dog's protective instincts can help deter intruders and make seniors feel safer in their homes. Additionally, the presence of a pet may help seniors feel less vulnerable during times of illness or injury. A pet may alert others to their caregiver's needs, or in some cases, provide physical support if needed.

In many cases, pets are known to sense changes in their owners' health and may even alert them to medical emergencies, such as seizures, low blood sugar, or heart issues, offering added safety and peace of mind for seniors and their families.

What about the cost burdens for older pet caregivers?

While both humans and animals benefit greatly from the love they share, sometimes they need a little help to stay together. The downside to having a beloved pet in the golden years is the financial strain of pet ownership that can lead some to make difficult choices between their pets' well-being over their own. Especially dire is the situation for low-income, homebound seniors who often live at or below the poverty line, leading them to make the heart-wrenching decision to sacrifice their own meals to feed their animal companions or prioritize their pet's medical needs over personal health. This self-sacrificing behavior not only impacts the seniors' nutritional intake and exacerbates existing medical conditions but can also have serious consequences for their long-term health and well-being, undercutting the 6 benefits listed above.

But there is hope! In a concerted effort to tackle the financial hurdles faced by older adults who have pets, one organization is providing support and assistance to this vulnerable demographic. The Senior Paw Project is a groundbreaking initiative developed by the Catherine Violet Hubbard Animal Sanctuary, a nonprofit organization based in Newtown, CT which was created in honor of one of the children lost at Sandy Hook Elementary. The Senior Paw Project serves low-income senior pet owners who live at or

below the poverty line by providing monthly pet food delivered direct to door, veterinary well care/prescriptive support, and foster/respite care. While they currently serve over 400 animals in Connecticut and Massuchesetts, the program hopes to expand to other states in the future and inspire other organizations to support older individuals in caring for their pets and promoting the positive impact of these relationships on overall well-being.

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About the Senior Paw Project:

The Senior Paw Project is a groundbreaking initiative developed by the Catherine Violet Hubbard Animal Sanctuary, a Connecticut-based nonprofit organization. The project addresses the real challenges faced by financially insecure older adults in keeping and caring for their pets.

The Senior Paw Project provides critical support to hundreds of senior pet owners residing in affordable and municipal housing communities throughout Connecticut and Massachusetts by providing monthly pet food delivered direct to door, veterinary well care/prescriptive support, and foster/respite care. The Senior Paw Project's efforts have been celebrated nationally through the prestigious PAWSitively Good Award, Petco Love Award, the Kelly Clarkson Show and more, reaching millions across the country and beyond.

The Senior Paw Project is part of the broader mission of the Catherine Violet Hubbard Animal Sanctuary, which was established in 2013 to honor Catherine Violet Hubbard, a six-year-old victim of the Sandy Hook Elementary School tragedy and passionate animal lover. The sanctuary, located on 34 acres of state farmland in Newtown, CT, serves as a destination for peace and healing, surrounded by woodlands and meadows. Through programs like the Senior Paw Project, the sanctuary continues to fulfill its commitment to ensuring animals live free from harm in homes and native habitats while also supporting the human-animal bond.

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