

ACTIVE times

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Can a dog a day keep the doctor away?

Experts: Pets can mentally, physically benefit seniors

By **Porcshe Moran**
Active Times

It might not be a bad idea to let your health go to the dogs.

Older adults can receive a myriad of mental and physical health benefits just from spending time with Fido.

Researchers from the Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction (ReCHAI) at the University of Missouri conduct studies to determine how pets improve the quality of life for seniors.

One study, called Pet Pals, focused on older adults who had recently moved into a nursing home. They received three visits per week for six weeks from either a trained visitor dog and its handler, or a friendly human visitor. During the dog visit, the handler did not interact with the resident. The test revealed the outcomes for the residents' stress, anxiety and depression levels were just as good with dog visits as with the human visits.

"Animals are unconditionally loving and supportive," says director of ReCHAI Rebecca Johnson, PhD, RN, FAAN. "They don't get tired of hearing the same stories. They aren't judgmental about any disabilities that the person might have. I think that component of the human-animal interaction makes it especially beneficial for older adults."

Crystal Willis, activities director for Villa Marie, has seen the positive effects that pets have on seniors firsthand. The staff at the Jefferson City retirement community and assisted living facility does what they call pet therapy three times a month. "Some employees bring in dogs, and we let family members of the residents bring in dogs," says Willis. "Our residents See **PETS**, p. 3



ACTIVE TIMES: **PORCSHE MORAN**

Research shows pet ownership can be beneficial to the health of seniors who have recently moved into a nursing home.

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love pets. We had an activity where someone brought in a litter of puppies. We just let them pet them and hold them. It is good therapy for them especially if they had a pet at home."

Positive changes in the physical health of seniors can also be linked to their interactions with dogs. Another ReCHAI study compared the walking speed, balance and confidence of two groups of seniors ages 74 to 87 after a 12-week test period. One of the groups had regular walking sessions with a dog, and the other group had the same amount of walking sessions with another person. The study results showed that the seniors in the dog walking group fared better than those walking with another person.

"The human walkers discouraged each other from walking," says Johnson. "The dogs were always ready to walk. The seniors liked making the dogs happy and helping them to get their exercise. It was a universally positive experience."

Fear of their pet outliving them, not wanting to take on the responsibility and having the desire to travel are some of the reasons why seniors might

shy away from bringing a pet into their lives. However, Karen Jennings, director of the Jefferson City Animal Protection and Control Division, says the pros of adopting a pet can often outweigh any perceived negatives.

"A lot of elderly people do adopt dogs out of here," says Jennings. "They want the companionship, or they want a dog to alert them when people come in the door."

Jennings also says that pets can benefit from being placed in the home of an older adult. "Some animals want a quieter household," she says. "Sometimes we get pets that come from people who are going into a nursing home and can't take their animals with them. It will stress that pet out if they are placed with a younger family that has a 5-year-old."

ReCHAI depends on donations to continue its research and programming which includes animal visitation at nursing homes and an online certification program that trains people to do pet therapy with older adults.

"We base our programs on things that are good for both ends of the leash," says Johnson. "It is important because the seniors benefit a great deal and also the animals benefit."

For more information on ReCHAI go to www.rechai.missouri.edu/index.htm.

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