



Senior Series

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and Ohio Aging Network professionals



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Pets: Friends for Life

Has an animal ever owned you? Sounds funny, doesn't it? We say that we own our pets, but in many cases we end up working to make them happy. And most of us work hard to do that!

Actually, that turns out to be a good thing. Human beings seem to have a need to care for someone or something. "At the beginning of life," says veterinarian Dr. Marty Becker in his book *The Healing Power of Pets*, "pets teach a child responsibility and nurturance." He goes on to say that, especially for an older adult living alone, pets "provide a way to hold onto those same skills."

Animals add many things to our lives: joy, companionship, comfort, friendship, and sometimes just a reason to get up each morning. The need to care for a pet can be a reason to stay active and get out into the

world on a daily basis. Often, we will do something (like take walks) for a pet that we wouldn't do just for ourselves. Exercise and continued flexibility for oneself is an added bonus of the walk, as is the contact with other people who are often drawn into conversation by their desire to interact with our pets.

A Canadian study of more than a thousand seniors found that pet owners were more active than those who had no pets. Over the one-year period covered by the study, pet owners remained more consistently able to perform daily living skills such as getting in and out of bed, dressing themselves, and eating than did similar study participants who did not have a pet.

Laughter is another gift a pet gives its person. Just watch a cat that

is watching a bird outside the window or a dog trying to free its favorite toy from under a rug. Notice that neither is concerned with how silly it looks. Each is completely concentrated on the task at hand. That's another gift our pets give us—they take us away from the problems and stresses of daily living and teach us to live within each moment.

Seniors who share their lives with a pet often spend less time at the doctor's office. A study reported in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* showed that only one month after acquiring a dog or cat, seniors experienced 50 percent fewer minor medical problems such as pain in their joints, indigestion, colds and flus, back pain, and headaches.

Pets help us deal with stressful life events, too. Many pet owners simply say that their pets are "just there" when things seem to be going wrong. Looking into the loving eyes of an animal as you stroke its silky fur can help you realize that you are not alone and that you are, indeed, worth loving. That can be a big boost when life isn't exactly going your way.

So, how do you decide if a pet (or which pet) is right for you? Start by asking yourself some basic questions. Do you have time to feed, love, play with, and train a companion animal? Can you cover the cost of food and veterinary care or find someone to

help you do so? Do you have strength limitations that might affect the kind or size of a pet you can care for? Do you have balance or flexibility limitations that might make a lively pet dangerous to have around? Do you (or anyone in your family) have allergies that would be aggravated by pet hair or dander? What will you do with your pet when you're away from home? Finally, what kind of pet do you want to share your life with?

The next step is to learn all you can about the type of animal that you think you would like to adopt. Do this before meeting actual animals! A big mistake that is often made is to be "taken" by a pair of soft eyes and end up adopting a pet that needs love but is totally wrong for the person and his or her lifestyle.

Gain information by talking with your local veterinarian about health care needs and costs relating to various animals and his or her tips on choosing a companion animal. Another idea is to borrow a friend's or relative's pet for a few days to see exactly what is involved in caring for an animal on a daily basis. Reading books from the local library and talking with people who already own the type of pet you're considering are other ways to become more informed. Just be careful to speak with people who have nothing to gain from your decision. A breeder might be very

knowledgeable, but remember that he or she is trying to make a living, too!

If you are still interested in adopting a pet, please consider adopting a stray from the local animal shelter. By adopting from a shelter, you will be improving three lives: your own, that of the animal you adopt, and that of one other animal. Your new pet's departure will make space in the shelter for another animal to be taken in, where it can wait in safety for a home of its own. Now, that's really living!

References

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- Schoen, A.M. (2001). *Kindred Spirits*. New York: Broadway Books.
- Serpell, J.A., (1991). Beneficial Effects of Pet Ownership on Some Aspects of Human Health. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 84, 717–720.

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