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Where to Find a Pet for a Senior

While breeders are a good source, adopting from shelters is usually much less expensive and comes with the added benefits of giving an unwanted animal a home and possibly saving it from euthanasia. Some shelters even offer reduced adoption fees for older pets and adopters age 55 and up.

Shelter employees often know each animal's personality well and can assist in making a good match. Online pet shopping is also possible, thanks to sites like www.petfinder.com, which allows potential owners to search for their perfect pet in a massive database composed of approximately 250,000 adoptable animals from nearly 11,000 animal and rescue groups nationwide. However, it's still recommended to meet a potential pet in person to more accurately gauge the fit.



The Benefits of Pet Ownership for the Elderly

Animals can help reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and increase social interaction and physical activity. Pets provide other intangibles, too. "Dogs and cats live very much in the present," says Dr. Jay P. Granat, a New Jersey-based psychotherapist. "They don't worry about tomorrow, which can be a very scary concept for an older person. An animal embodies that sense of here and now, and it tends to rub off on people."

Pets can also have an astounding effect on symptoms of depression and feelings of loneliness. "Older pet owners have often told us how incredibly barren and lonely their lives were without their pets' companionship, even when there were some downsides to owning an active pet," says Linda Anderson, who founded the Angel Animals Network in Minneapolis with her husband, Allen, to spread awareness of the benefits of pet ownership.

Psychologist Penny B. Donnenfeld, who brings her own golden retriever mix, Sandee, to her New York City office, has even witnessed animals' ability to prompt better memory recall in their elderly owners. "I've seen those with memory loss interact with an animal and regain access to memories from long ago," she explains. "Having a pet helps the senior focus on something other than their physical problems and negative preoccupations about loss or aging."

Animals benefit from adoption, too, particularly when seniors adopt older pets. "These lucky animals go from the pound to paradise. Retired adopters tend to have lots of time to devote to a previously unwanted pet, forming a lasting bond," says Chicago veterinarian Dr. Tony Kremer, who operates Help Save Pets, a nonprofit rescue organization, with his wife Meg.

How to Find the Right Pet for a Senior

While the advantages of pet ownership are undeniable, there are some drawbacks and consequences to be aware of before going out to adopt a furry friend for an aging loved one. Dr. Donnenfeld encourages seniors and caregivers to have a thorough conversation about pet ownership before welcoming a pet into the family.

10 Questions to Ask When Considering a Pet for a Senior

1. **Is the senior set in their ways?** “If change isn’t your loved one’s cup of tea, then they may not be a good candidate,” say the Andersons. Adopting an animal usually affects a person’s whole daily routine.
2. **Have they had a pet before?** Amy Sherman, licensed therapist and author of *Distress-Free Aging: A Boomer’s Guide to Creating a Fulfilled and Purposeful Life*, thinks it’s best if the elderly person is an experienced owner. However, if they are open to a new and rewarding commitment, then first-timers can still make great owners.
3. **Does the senior have any disabilities or functional limitations?** “Dogs can be wonderful companions who encourage a senior to exercise,” Dr. Donnenfeld says. But dogs can be a challenge for individuals with limited mobility. If taking a dog outside and walking it is too trying, lower-maintenance animals like cats and birds may be preferable.
4. **Would a therapeutic or emotional support animal be beneficial?** If a person is very infirm or impaired, they may be a candidate for a specially trained therapy dog to help them function both at home and while on outings.
5. **What age pet would be best?** A puppy or kitten may not be ideal for elderly owners because of the intensive care and training they require. Furthermore, young pets may outlive their owners. It’s important to consider that some animals like birds have especially long life spans. On the other hand, a senior pet may have its own physical limitations and illnesses but they are usually well trained already.
6. **What temperament would be a good fit for the senior?** It is very important to research different breeds’ characteristics and interact with prospective adoptees to get a feel for their energy levels and personality. “Many older people might think they’d do better with a Jack Russell Terrier because it’s a small breed, but they are very, very, very high energy and require a great deal of effort and commitment,” says Susan Daffron, author of *Happy Hound: Develop a Great Relationship with Your Adopted Dog or Puppy*. While there are some general truths about specific breeds, every animal is unique.
7. **Is the pet healthy?** It’s important that any pet be examined by a professional prior to adoption. “You don’t want to compromise an older person’s immune system since some pets carry diseases,” says Dr. Katharine Hillestad, a veterinarian based in Rhinelander, Wisconsin. Unhealthy pets can be difficult for seniors to handle both emotionally and financially.
8. **One pet or two?** While multiple pets can keep each other company, that may not be a good idea for an older person. “Two animals may bond with each other rather than with their owner,” Dr. Hillestad explains.
9. **Are finances an issue?** Pets are a significant long-term financial commitment. A small puppy can rack up more than \$810 for food, medical care, toys and grooming just in its first year. A low-maintenance animal like a fish is less expensive, coming in at about \$235, according to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Be sure to carefully consider a senior’s current budget before taking home any animal.
10. **Is there a backup plan in place for the pet?** It isn’t pleasant to think about, but owners must plan for the unexpected for their pets, too. If a senior had to go to the hospital, spend time in a short-term rehabilitation facility, move to a long-term care community or even passes away, what would happen to their animal(s)? Our golden years can be very unpredictable, so it’s important to have a contingency plan in place for our furry and feathered friends before an emergency strikes. Without one, beloved animals may wind up back in a shelter.



“I’m 63 in dog years. Respect your elders and let me have the chair.”