

Influence of Companion Animals on the Physical and Psychological Health of Older People: An Analysis of a One-Year Longitudinal Study.

Clinical Investigation

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*Raina, Parminder PhD *; Waltner-Toews, David DVM, PhD *; Bonnett, Brenda DVM, PhD *; Woodward, Christel PhD +; Abernathy, Tom PhD ++*

Abstract:

OBJECTIVE: To examine whether companion animals or attachment to a companion animal was associated with changes in physical and psychological health in older people and whether the relationships between physical and psychological health and human social networks were modified by the presence or absence of a companion animal.

DESIGN: A 1-year longitudinal study with standardized telephone interview data collected at baseline and repeated at 1-year

SETTING: Wellington County, Ontario, Canada

PARTICIPANTS: An age- and sex stratified random sample (baseline n = 1054; follow-up n = 995) of noninstitutionalized adults aged 65 and older (mean age = 73, SD +/- 6.3)

MEASUREMENTS: Social Network Activity was measured using a family and non-family social support scale, participation in an organized social group, involvement in the affairs of the social group, the practice of confiding in others, feelings of loneliness, and the perceived presence of support in a crisis situation. Chronic conditions were measured as the current number of selected health problems. Pet ownership was assessed by the report of owning a dog or a cat and the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale score. Physical health was assessed as the ability to perform Activities of Daily Living (ADLs). Psychological health was measured as a summed score comprising the level of satisfaction regarding one's health, family and friend relationships, job, finances, life in general, overall happiness, and perceived mental health. Sociodemographic variables assessed include subject age, sex, marital status, living arrangements, education, household income, and major life events.

RESULTS: Pet owners were younger, currently married or living with someone, and more physically active than non-pet owners. The ADL level of respondents who did not currently own pets deteriorated more on average ($[\beta] = -.270$, $P = .040$) than that of respondents who currently owned pets after adjusting for other variables during the 1-year period. No statistically significant direct association was observed between pet ownership and change in psychological well-being ($P > .100$). However, pet ownership significantly modified the relationship between social support and the change in psychological well-being ($P = .001$) over a 1-year period.

CONCLUSIONS: The results demonstrate the benefits of pet ownership in maintaining or slightly enhancing ADL levels of older people. However, a more complex relationship was observed between pet ownership and an older person's well-being.