

## Friends for Life

### **Pets and seniors can be a perfect match, says Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine.**

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The Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences recently released a reminder of the benefits of pairing an elderly person with an appropriate pet.

"Humans and animals need love, companionship and activity," explained Kit Darling, infection control coordinator at the college and volunteer for Aggeland Pets With a Purpose (APWAP).

"The elderly who are in assisted living and long-term care facilities enjoy visits from pets," Darling said. "Animal-assisted therapy organizations such as APWAP provide visits. It is a very rewarding experience to see a person smile and enjoy time with Dexter and Daschle, my pet Dachshunds. Their presence causes residents to talk about pets they once had. One lady gets so excited when Dexter visits; she will invite him to 'sit on Grandma's lap.'"

Just as elderly people in assisted living desire the companionship of animals, seniors living independently can benefit from a daily routine that includes a pet.

Darling says that pets provide companionship, decrease loneliness, accept you as you are and provide a sense of being needed. Pets can give the elderly a different outlook because they live in the moment and help seniors do likewise, she said, noting that they can bring laughter into one's life and increase socialization. A senior citizen walking his or her dog will be more likely to meet neighbors and strike up conversations, she said.

According to the college, recent studies have indicated that positive interaction with pets helps seniors overcome depression and lowers blood pressure/cholesterol levels.

"Pets keep seniors active both physically and mentally," Darling said. "Walking the dog or going outside with the dog will increase one's activity. Fresh air and sunshine are good for both. Stroking or brushing the animal is good exercise for the hands and arms. Pets may motivate the elderly to do activities they might not do otherwise."

Despite all the benefits of pet ownership for seniors, choosing the right pet is absolutely essential.

"An animal such as a cat or small dog that can sit in a person's lap may be better for the elderly," Darling said. "Large dogs may be more difficult to control. Cats require less care than a dog and an adult animal may be easier to manage than a young one."

One also must consider the commitment involved, in both time and money.

"Food, grooming and veterinary expenses are some of the costs associated with having a pet," Darling said. "These may be difficult for someone on a limited income. A smaller animal may help to decrease some of these costs."

Darling emphasized that the decision to be a pet caregiver is a personal one. Senior citizens must evaluate the advantages and disadvantages a pet will bring.

"The human-animal bond can be great and pets may be considered a part of the family," Darling said. As people age, "their children grow up, their spouse and friends may die and the pet is very important to them. You must decide if a pet will enhance your life and is right for your lifestyle."