

OWNING A PET IN LATER LIFE

Owning a pet is a wonderful experience and for older people, particularly those that live alone, an animal companion can make the world of difference. If you are thinking about taking on a pet, here's what you need to consider.

The benefits of pet ownership

Research has shown that having a pet in the home can improve one's health, with a Cambridge University study showing that pet owners reported fewer headaches, coughs and colds. Also, according to the Pet Health Council, stroking a dog or cat can reduce the heart rate, thereby helping to lower blood pressure.

Besides these physical benefits, pets can help your mental health too. They can help to reduce feelings of loneliness and depression, and for those that choose a canine companion, the daily walk not only aids general fitness and wellbeing, but can introduce those living alone to like-minded walkers, providing an often much-needed social aspect to life. Your new canine friend is unlikely to let you sleep all morning as it will be demanding attention, food and a walk. It's amazing how much better we all feel for a daily stroll and a new study has shown that even just 20 minutes exercise a day reduces illness and extends life expectancy in most people.

And because older people are more likely to be at home for much of the day, they will have plenty of time to devote to their pet, making it an ideal situation for both.

Things to consider

Owning a pet, particularly those that live for a significant number of years, is a serious responsibility. Many cats now live into their late teens or beyond. Therefore it is essential that you think carefully before taking on an animal, and choose a pet that suits your lifestyle. For instance, some dogs require more exercise than others, and it's not necessarily related to size, so do your research if you're considering a canine companion. It's not fair to take on a dog if you are not going to give it sufficient exercise as it will get bored and frustrated and may then develop behavioural problems.

The cost of keeping animals is also an important consideration. The 2012 PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report revealed that a dog or cat will cost its owners an average of £30 a week during its lifetime, Vets bills, vaccinations, flea and worm treatment, and of course food, all add up so it's essential that you are able to cope with the cost. Insurance is also very important to cover your pet in case of illness or injury and the cost of this must be factored in.

Rather than a puppy or kitten think of getting an older animal from a pet rescue centre. This will avoid you having to go through the training of your new pet which can be quite time consuming! Don't forget to register your new pet with a Veterinary Surgeon and arrange to get it checked over shortly after its arrival to make sure it has no hidden problems.

If things change

An important consideration for many older pet owners is what might happen to their beloved animals should they need hospital treatment or if they have to move into a care home. However there is help available that allows you to plan for such events.

The Cinnamon Trust, for instance, is a national charity that aims to keep owners and their

pets together, and has a team of volunteers that can help with everything from day-to-day care to arranging a foster home if you have to go to hospital. The charity can also find long-term foster homes for pets when their owner dies.

The Trust is also able to provide a list of sheltered accommodation that welcomes pets, which means you may be able to stay together even if you can no longer live in your own home. Even where that is not possible, foster carers can often arrange to meet regularly so that you can still see your pet.

Of course, it's a sad truth that some pets outlive their owners, and it's important to consider what might happen to your companion in the event of your death. If friends or family are not able to take on a pet, speak to charities such as the Cinnamon Trust or National Animal Welfare Trust, or other local animal rescue centres. You may be able to sign an agreement with them guaranteeing that they will take over ownership of your pet on your death. Also that will allow you to provide plenty of information about your pet, giving them the best chance of matching him or her to a suitable and loving new home should the worst happen. In the case of the Cinnamon Trust and the National Animal Welfare Trust, you are even given a pet care card, much like an organ donor card.

Though it's not something most of us like to think about, knowing that your pet will have a safe, warm and loving home in the future means you can enjoy your new pet without having to worry.

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