Pets Can Help Older Adults Cope With Chronic Pain

Dogs or cats can improve relaxation, physical activity and mood management for elderly folks who suffer from persistent pain.

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Chronic pain is no fun, especially when the discomfort persists for weeks, months or even years. But whether folks have a headache, low back pain, cancer pain or arthritis pain, new findings published in the Journal of Applied Gerontology suggest that pets can aid older adults in managing chronic pain, according to the University of Michigan School of Public Health.

For the study, investigators conducted four focus groups with a total of 25 participants, age 70 and older. These men and women owned a dog or cat and experienced persistent pain from health conditions that affected their everyday life.

Researchers asked individuals to describe how pets affected their daily routines and health, including pain and pain management. Scientists noted that the presence of these animals helped older adults manage their chronic pain in a number of different ways. Pets relaxed and distracted their owners, kept them physically active and boosted positive feelings.

“For example, dogs might help people stick to a walking routine, and having a purring cat on your lap can be relaxing,” said Mary Janevic, MPH, PhD, an associate research scientist in Health Behavior and Health Education at the University of Michigan School of Public Health.

“Engaging in pet care can give a sense of daily purpose and a routine that keeps a person going, even when they are having a pain flare-up,” she added. “In this way, pets can be thought of as a ‘natural’ resource for chronic pain self-management.”

But not all pet owners’ chronic pain will be alleviated by their pet, Janevic cautioned. Some people said pets made their pain worse, she reported. (For example, in instances where the dog pulled too hard during a walk or lay on a bad leg.) In addition, these cherished companions can trigger stress when they develop behavioral or health issues—not to mention that the death of a pet can lead to grief.

Although findings showed pet ownership can help many individuals manage their chronic pain, Janevic and colleagues don’t recommend that people get these creatures solely for this reason.

Opting to become a pet owner, she said, is “a complicated decision and requires a careful weighing of pros and cons.”

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