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## **Pets for Seniors—Enhance Quality of Life**

What could be more relaxing than watching an aquarium of tropical fish? Or petting a dog or cat? Studies indicate that seniors who regularly interact with or own pets live longer and experience better health than seniors who have no pet companionship. Results have shown that pet owners often experience a decrease in temperature, stress level, and even blood pressure! Pets can provide exercise, entertainment and security. They are forgiving, loyal and love unconditionally.

An increasing number of hospitals, clinics and nursing homes are now using pet therapy with seniors and patients who are afflicted with cancer, AIDS and mental illness, and the results are encouraging. Studies have proven that interacting with pets, not only dogs and cats but even birds, fish and small reptiles, improves overall well-being. A pet can provide an emotional outlet and recreational activity. Animal companionship lessens loneliness, the feeling of isolation and boredom, and has even been known to eliminate depression in some seniors. Researchers speculate that the care-taking role involved in pet ownership, the responsibility to feed, exercise, clean and provide for a pet, increases self worth, provides seniors with a sense of purpose and responsibility, encourages them to be more active in day-to-day activities and may even enhance their ability to connect with and relate to others.

Seniors who have suffered the loss of a spouse or other loved one describe experiencing an increase in appetite and activity and a general restoration of an interest in the outside world after becoming new pet owners. They report a renewed sense of purpose which gave them a reason to take better care of themselves. Seniors who live alone even indicate that their fear of being victimized or abused has diminished when they became pet owners.

Do not underestimate the important role pets can play in health. Pets make us laugh, help us relax and divert us from daily burdens. The psychological benefits of pet ownership can be amazing!