

Dog owners over the age of 65 act 10 years younger than their biological age

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(Medical Xpress)—Owning a dog makes older people fitter and healthier, according to new research from the University of St Andrews.

The research, published in the journal *Preventative Medicine*, found that [dog owners](#) over the age of 65 act 10 years younger than their biological age.

The study, led by Dr Zhiqiang Feng also found that owning a dog can also have a [beneficial effect](#) on an [elderly person](#)'s mental health.

Previous studies have looked at the positive benefits of [pet ownership](#) on the elderly, with dog owners being shown to have fewer symptoms of depression and decreases in blood pressure and heart rate. However, this is the first study to look properly at levels of [physical activity](#) in the over 65 group.

Dr Feng commented, "It is well known that pet ownership may help alleviate feelings of loneliness and depression in [older people](#), but one area that has received little attention is the effect of dog ownership on the [physical activity levels](#) of the elderly.

"Our results show that dog ownership is associated with an increased level of physical activity in the over-65s. On average, older dog owners were 12% more active than their counterparts who did not own a dog."

Dr Feng monitored the activity of 547 elderly people in Tayside, with an average age was 79. Of those who took part, 9% – around 50 people – were dog owners, and 75% of these walked their dogs.

Over a seven-day period participants were asked to wear an accelerometer which measured their movements. Of the group, the dog owners were not only more physically active, but their levels of activity were the equivalent of people ten years younger.

The length of the walk did not make any difference to the positive effects of dog walking. Of those who took part, the dog owners on average showed significantly lower levels of anxiety and depression.

Dr Feng, a senior lecturer at the School of Geography and Geosciences continued, "Our results suggest that [dog ownership](#) may motivate

personal activity and enable older people to overcome many potential barriers such as lack of social support, inclement weather and concerns over personal safety."

In the new report, Dr Feng recommends dog-loaning and walking groups as possible ways of non-dog owners experiencing the benefits felt by dog owners.

Where this is not feasible, it may be possible to replicate some benefits via other mechanisms such as 'nudging' devices that replicate the dog-owner relationship.

He said, "Our findings suggest that there may be merit in investigating whether

dog 'owning' or 'loaning' might be a plausible public health intervention to promote physical activity.

"It may also be possible to combine an electronic device with a community, such as a walking social group linked through social media. However, further research is needed to investigate whether older adults are open and able to use new technologies.

"Our study is especially relevant in our increasingly ageing society and it is never too late for sedentary older people to take up exercise. However effective intervention schemes in promoting and increasing physical activity still remain a global public health challenge."

More information: Zhiqiang Feng, Chris Dibben, Miles D. Witham, Peter T. Donnan, Thenmalar Vadiveloo, Falko Sniehotta, Iain K. Crombie, Marion E.T. McMurdo, "Dog ownership and physical activity in later life: A cross-sectional observational study," *Preventive Medicine*, Volume 66, September 2014, Pages 101-106, ISSN 0091-7435,

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