

Senior adults can see health benefits from dog ownership

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Rebecca Johnson and her team determined that older adults who also are pet owners benefit from the bonds they form with their canine companions. Credit: Sinclair School of Nursing

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that adults of all ages should engage in 150 or more minutes of moderate physical activity per week. Among adults 60 years of age or more, walking is the most common form of leisure-time physical activity because it is self-paced, low impact and does not require equipment. Researchers at the University of Missouri have determined that older adults who also are pet owners benefit from the bonds they form with their canine companions. Dog walking is associated with lower body mass index, fewer doctor visits, more frequent exercise and an increase in social benefits for seniors.

"Our study explored the associations between dog ownership and pet bonding with walking behavior and health outcomes in [older adults](#)," said Rebecca Johnson, a professor at the MU College of Veterinary Medicine, and the Millsap Professor of Gerontological Nursing in the Sinclair School of Nursing. "This study provides evidence for the association between dog walking and physical health using a large, nationally representative sample."

The study analyzed 2012 data from the Health and Retirement study sponsored by the National Institute on Aging and the Social Security Administration. The study included data about human-animal interactions, [physical activity](#), frequency of [doctor visits](#) and [health outcomes](#) of the participants.

"Our results showed that dog ownership and walking were related to increases in [physical health](#) among older adults," said Johnson, who also serves as director of the Research Center for Human-Animal Interaction at MU. "These results can provide the basis for medical professionals to recommend pet ownership for older adults and can be translated into reduced health care expenditures for the aging population."

Results from the study also indicated that people with higher degrees of

pet bonding were more likely to walk their dogs and to spend more time walking their dogs each time than those who reported weaker bonds. Additionally, the study showed that pet walking offers a means to socialize with pet owners and others.

Retirement communities also could be encouraged to incorporate more pet-friendly policies such as including dog walking trails and dog exercise areas so that their residents could have access to the health benefits, Johnson said.

The study, "Dog Walking, the Human-Animal Bond and Older Adults' Physical Health," recently was published by *The Gerontologist*.

More information: Angela L. Curl et al. Dog Walking, the Human–Animal Bond and Older Adults' Physical Health, *The Gerontologist* (2016). [DOI: 10.1093/geront/gnw051](https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gnw051)

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