

# Home remedies: Animals as healers

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Pet therapy is gaining fans in health care and beyond. Animal-assisted therapy can reduce pain and anxiety in people with a range of health problems.

## What is pet therapy?

Pet therapy is a broad term that includes animal-assisted therapy and other animal-assisted activities. Animal-assisted therapy is a growing field that uses dogs or other animals to help people recover from or better cope with health problems, such as heart disease, cancer and mental health disorders.

Animal-assisted activities, on the other hand, have a more general purpose, such as providing comfort and enjoyment for nursing home residents.

## **How does animal-assisted therapy work?**

If you're in the [hospital](#) your [health care](#) provider might mention the hospital's animal-assisted therapy program. If you're interested, an assistance dog and its handler would visit your hospital room. They stay for 10 or 15 minutes. You're invited to pet the dog and ask the handler questions. After the visit, you realize you feel a little less tired and a bit more optimistic.

## **Who can benefit from animal-assisted therapy?**

Animal-assisted therapy can significantly reduce pain, anxiety, depression and fatigue in people with a range of health problems:

- Children having dental procedures
- People receiving cancer treatment
- People in long-term care facilities
- People with cardiovascular diseases
- People with dementia
- Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder
- People with anxiety

And it's not only people with [health problems](#) who reap the benefits. Family members and friends who sit in on animal visits say they feel better, too.

Pet therapy is also being used in nonmedical settings, such as universities and community programs, to help people deal with anxiety and stress.

## **Does pet therapy have risks?**

The biggest concern, particularly in hospitals, is safety and sanitation. Most hospitals and other facilities that use [pet therapy](#) have stringent rules to ensure that the [animals](#) are clean, vaccinated, well-trained and screened for appropriate behavior.

## **Animal-Assisted Therapy In Action**

More than a dozen registered therapy dogs and their handlers are part of Mayo Clinic's Caring Canines program. They make regular visits to various hospital departments and even make special visits on request. The dogs are a welcome distraction and help reduce the stress and anxiety that can accompany hospital visits.

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