

Aging with pets isn't just a sentimental concern, but a matter of health and wellness

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Is home somewhere that you feel comfortable? Is it filled with memories of beloved friends and family—some of whom may be furry animals?

Researchers analyzed data from the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging, a national study of adult development and aging which recruited more than 50,000 Canadians between the ages of 45 and 85. They found that [over one-third of older Canadians are choosing to age with pets](#) and that, for some people, living with pets can increase [life satisfaction](#).

My research focuses on social justice and aging, with a special interest in the human-animal bond. I recently collaborated on [a report for the federal government on seniors, aging in place and community](#).

When I researched community supports in Canada for this report, I discovered there is no government funding to help older adults care for pets.

This is unfortunate because the relationship between humans and non-human companions has become increasingly important to Canadians. While people and their pets may seem like a frivolous concern, people's relationships with their pets impact wellness and health in perhaps surprising ways.

Helping people in financial need to pay for their pets is fiscally responsible, since maintaining the human-animal bond could in the long term reduce health-care costs.

Aging in place with pets

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines aging in place as ["the ability to live in one's own home and community safely, independently and comfortably, regardless of age, income or ability level."](#)

Aging in place is associated with [decreased depression](#), [maintaining personal identity](#), staying connected with [community](#), [friends and family](#)

as well as avoiding the [emotional and physical pain associated with leaving a familiar place](#).

For many older adults pets are [considered to be family members](#). Interactions with pets are not only important in terms of companionship, [they are also associated with better health](#). For example, a study of people in Germany and Australia found that people who continuously own a pet are healthiest, [visiting the doctor less often than non-pet owners](#). Researchers have linked the human-animal bond to [reduced cardiovascular disease risk](#), [lowered blood pressure](#) and [lower cholesterol](#).

Research also suggests people with pets are also [less lonely, have stronger support networks and are often more involved in community activities](#).

But many older adults [do not have adequate retirement income](#), and in such cases caring for pets can become too expensive to manage.

Given the many quality-of-life and health-related benefits of pet ownership, developing community support programs dedicated to keeping pets and older adults together are expected to [result in savings to health-care systems and social programs](#).

Climate change dangers

Another concern regarding aging in place with pets is the potential impact of climate change—and how this may impact health.

Since climate change is predicted to result in more [heatwaves, hot summers, droughts and flooding](#) there is the need to develop community support initiatives [to prevent heat-related deaths among older adults](#). [Older adults' vulnerability to extreme heat is well documented](#), and is

[increased for those who have more than one illness](#) as well as for those who [are socially isolated](#).

Many older adults may opt to stay in a hot home with their pet, rather than going to a cooling centre without their companion animal, particularly if they foresee no options for the animal's care. By providing [access to air conditioners, which low-income older adults can't afford on their own](#), older adults' heat-related suffering could be alleviated without concerns about abandoning their pet.

Plans to help older adults faced with climate-related danger should also consider that some [people have chosen not evacuate severe weather situations when they are unable to bring their pets](#). Compliance with evacuation orders might increase if government programs were implemented to provide vaccinations for pets and to evacuate older [adults](#) with their pets so that they can go to [emergency shelters](#) together.

In the United States there have been changes to [disaster planning and disaster preparation exercises to respond to the rescue and care of companion animals](#). Ensuring pets are evacuated and reunited with their humans can be a positive influence on [mental health after disasters](#).

Integrating new initiatives within existing community supports to help [older adults care for the animals that share their lives](#) would be a win-win, promoting wellness and potentially reducing health expenditures over the longer term.

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