

Pets can be a mixed bag for older Americans

I'm in my late 60s, I live alone, and I'm thinking about adopting a dog. Some family members have indicated that they don't think it's a good idea. What are the pros and cons?

Research indicates there can be real benefits of pet ownership among the elderly, but you're wise to think through this decision carefully.

First, the advantages: Several studies have linked owning a dog, cat, bird, or other pet to better health among older people. For example, a University of Guelph study indicated that caring for a pet may provide a sense of purpose and encourage more activity in daily life. The researchers also found that pets provided a buffering effect against feelings of loneliness and isolation among older people, and provided a basis of support during life crises if an elderly person lacked other social supports — family and friends — during those times.

In addition, a University of California at Los Angeles study found that Medicare patients who owned pets had fewer medical visits than those who did not own pets. Australia's Baker Medical Research Institute found that pet owners had lower blood pressure and lower levels of blood cholesterol and triglycerides. And the State University of New York in Buffalo found that people in wheelchairs who had service dogs were less depressed, less dependent on caregivers, and more active outside their homes than those without service dogs.

Besides, a pet can be fun. Who doesn't want a little fun in life?



But pets can also be a huge responsibility. For one thing, they can be expensive. With food, veterinary care, medications, and grooming and boarding fees, the costs can add up. And pets who misbehave or who are overly active might prove to be a stressful addition to the house. If you like to travel or find yourself facing a long stay at a hospital or rehabilitation facility, you'll have to make sure your pet is cared for while you're away. Remember, this could be a lifetime commitment. Be sure to take all of these issues into consideration.

If you're not sure, ask about volunteering at your local shelter or a breed rescue organization. Or, let friends or family who have pets know that you're available for pet sitting.

If you decide to take the plunge, consider adopting from your local animal shelter or humane society, where trained staff can help decide what pet would be a good fit for you — perhaps an older pet that's already housebroken, for example, or a breed or mix known for lower energy levels.

Also, it would be a good idea to take steps to map out your new pet's future in case you can no longer provide care. The Humane Society of the United States has an information kit available on its Web site at <http://www.hsus.org/petsinfuture> or by contacting them at "Humane Legacy," 2100 L Street NW, Washington, DC 20037, or (202) 452-1100.

Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or filipic.3@osu.edu.



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Dear Subscriber: May is Older Americans Month. For information, see the U.S. Administration on Aging's Web site at <http://www.aoa.gov>.

Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. This column was reviewed by Christine Price, Ohio State University Extension gerontologist and assistant professor of Human Development and Family Science in the College of Human Ecology.

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