

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

New leash on life

Pets can do wonders for older adopters

By Encarnacion Pyle

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They're best buddies who watch out for each other. You might even say they've saved each other's lives. Sarah Lilly, who recently turned 90, and her 12-year-old Lhasa apso-poodle mix, Katy, have been inseparable for nearly two years.

They wake up by 7 each morning, eat breakfast, take a walk and spend much of the day lavishly doting on the other. When in their favorite recliner, for example, Lilly strokes Katy's soft, tan, loosely curled fur, and the cuddly 12-pound dog expresses her appreciation with wet kisses.

"She's such a blessing," said Lilly, adding that before Katy came into her life she had become a homebody after being scared by several falls.

Now, she takes Katy for at least two walks a day and to visit a neighbor caring for his ailing mother.

Wherever they go, Katy is mindful of giving Lilly plenty of room and stays on the other side of her cane.

"She's so smart; she follows me everywhere but manages to stay out of my way," Lilly said.

Experts say pets can play a significant role at every stage of human development, and perhaps no more so than for older adults.

Pets can help reduce stress, lower blood pressure and regulate heart rate during stressful situations, she said. They also can increase the social interac-

tion and physical activity of seniors who live alone or in group facilities, which increasingly have become welcoming of pets as the research into their benefits grow.

Some senior centers allow residents to own pets; others bring them in for therapy. And a few have adopted "resident" dogs or cats so patients can enjoy the physical and psychological effects, which can be just as powerful.

"It's my theory that pets and babies have a way of bringing seniors out of themselves and their problems," said Dr. Donald Mack, a geriatrician at the Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center.

Studies have shown that animal companionship can reduce depression and loneliness, as well as generate feelings of greater self-esteem and overall emotional well-being.

"What better than to have the unconditional love of a dog," said Deb Finelli, assistant director of the Franklin County Dog Shelter.

Pets also benefit from the arrangement, particularly when older people adopt older pets in need of a forever home. "It's a new lease on life for them, too," Finelli said.

About 40 percent of the shelter's adoptions are for senior dogs, which can be taken home at a discount rate of \$73 compared to \$123 for younger animals.

The cost includes a dog license, shots, spaying or neutering and a microchip.



Sarah Lilly, 90, walks her 12-year-old Lhasa-poo, Katy, in her neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio. Pets can reduce stress, lower blood pressure, increase social interaction and physical activity among the elderly who live alone or in group facilities.
[JOSHUA A. BICKEL/DISPATCH]

Best dog breeds for seniors

A senior dog can make a great companion for a senior human, as they may already be trained and are usually less active and demanding than a puppy. Still, some breeds are better for seniors due to their size and temperament.

The best breeds for seniors, according to A Place for Mom:

1. Pug
2. Schnauzer
3. Cocker Spaniel
4. Chihuahua
5. Boston Terrier
6. Shih Tzu
7. Beagle
8. Poodle
9. Yorkshire Terrier
10. Pomeranian

Remember that breed alone cannot determine if a dog is right for someone. If you get an adult dog, you will have a better idea of the dog's needs and behavior.

Senior animals often are trained, calmer and require less physical activity than younger animals — making them ideal for many older adults, said Rachel Finney, executive director of the Capital Area Humane Society.

But not every animal is right for everyone, Finney said. And anyone considering adopting a pet should carefully consider what they want in a pet and what they would do if they could no longer care for that animal.



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