

# The Daily News

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## ANIMALS HAVE BEEN SHOWN TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF SOME CARE HOME RESIDENTS.



*“Before the hens arrived the garden was just a big empty space. Now the doors are always open and residents enjoy being in the garden. When families visit they bring their relative to the garden and they have fun times together”*

*Cooke et al, 2013*

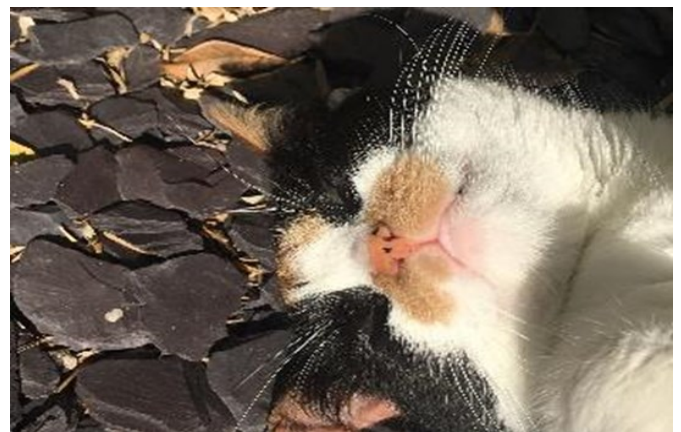
Pamela Paws  
Health Correspondent

The number of older people living in residential and nursing care is rising. Moving from independent living to residential/nursing care is a key transition in an older person's life and can significantly affect an individual's quality of life. A homelike environment is important to residents and the presence of animals or pets may contribute to a feeling of less institutionalised living. The benefits of animals for residents in long-term care have almost universal acceptance with the public, ever

eager for the 'feel-good' stories of animals visiting and helping residents published in the media. However, we need to have an evidence-based understanding of their benefits and this is what researchers at the University of Exeter set out to do.



The team conducted a systematic review of the evidence about the **experiences and views of residents, families, carers and care home staff of interacting with animals**. The team followed best practice guidelines for the methods of the review to ensure that the findings were as useful as possible and worked with a care home owner, a care home manager and a veterinarian.





Lead author, Dr Noreen Orr said that they found a total of 34 studies, published in 40 research articles, that contained relevant information to inform the review. Studies were conducted in 12 countries and reported on a wide range of human animal interactions – resident home pets and animals kept on site such as chickens, personal pets of residents, and animal-assisted interventions such as dog therapy or small animal visits (e.g. kittens, rabbits).

So, what did they find?

### **THE PRESENCE OF ANIMALS OR PETS CAN SIGNIFICANTLY IMPACT THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF SOME OLDER PEOPLE LIVING IN RESIDENTIAL AND NURSING CARE.**

The qualitative evidence synthesis captured rich detail on resident experiences of interacting with animals. These interactions had positive effects on the health and wellbeing of residents by providing opportunities for residents to interact with 'living beings', to reminisce and share stories, to care for a living creature, have respite and engage their senses.

Dr Rebecca Abbott, co-author of the report, provided some informative quotes from the literature to demonstrate what this might mean in practice for older people living in care homes.

Some residents highlighted the 'almost human' qualities of animals which helped them bond with their pets and from which they could draw emotional support, as

illustrated in this quote from a resident –



*"...When I've been down in the dumps, she knows because she comes and puts her paw on my cheeks and she's sorry for me"*

*Freedman et al  
2021*

Animals helped residents **reminisce** and were a way of **connecting to their past lives**. Memories of previously owned pets could emerge and this quote from a nurse shows how a dog was a trigger for a resident to talk about the dog she used to have

*"One of the female residents suffers from severe dementia, but sitting with the dog, she starts talking about the dog she used to have at home. Normally she doesn't talk much, but then she talks without break. It is incredible."*

*Gundersen & Johannessen, 2018*

Animals provided **comfort and companionship** for some residents, and were very important for those who brought their pets to the care homes and helped ease the transition to living in a care home. The presence of animals could give residents **respite from their loneliness**.

*"They're so much company when you're alone, you know. They sit with you, and you ask them to come and they come...You must believe that when you're alone and you have an animal, you're not alone. You have somebody with you."*

*Roenke & Mulligan, 1998*





Animals brought an interesting dimension to the daily life and routines of the care homes and looking forward to visits brought **pleasure** to residents –

*"I love it. I look forward to it...I'd be very upset (if she missed seeing the visiting animals). Because I look forward to seeing them so much."*

Wong 2015

The presence of animals often helped create **a positive atmosphere**, not only for residents but for staff and family too, as illustrated by this quote from a care worker -

*"...it was good for both the staff and the resident to have something totally different from a regular line of duty ... And it really did have staff just smiling and just feeling good overall, knowing ...it was a good thing for the home"*

Casey et al, 2018

The time spent with animals could bring residents **'moments' of joy and calm** and particularly, for those with dementia, gave them temporary respite from their illness, as shown by this quote from a care worker -

*"One lady was in the final stage of dementia. She did not communicate vocally at all. She would sit all day and just rock. When the chicks were hatching ...she started to say 'chicken chicken...'I was very tearful...she put out her hand and cupped the chick and tried to kiss their beak. That is why I am so enthusiastic about the hens".*

Cooke et al, 2013

Physical contact with animals through stroking, petting and cuddling could trigger memories and conversation, and also brought pleasure and a sense of calm and

comfort to residents, as described by one dog handler:



*"When the dog sits next to them and they can get close to it, they sit quietly and are relaxed. It looks as if they get an inner calmness, in a way"*

Gunderson & Johannessen, 2018

Rather than asking residents or staff what they felt about animals, some studies tried to quantify the effects of animals using a variety of surveys and scales. While a few studies reported improvements in anxiety, depression and loneliness, overall there was limited evidence of measured improvements in well-being. Professor Jo Thompson Coon, another member of the research team, said that this might be a reflection of the measures used in the studies not representing what is important to residents. Also, it may be that different animals interacting with residents who vary in their experiences and history, leads to such diverse experiences that it is difficult to measure the beneficial effects of animals.





Clearly not all residents will be positive about animals or pets in long term care

*"That's very kind, but I'd rather that you didn't. Animals are too sad for me. I mean they remind me too much of the ones I had. It's painful. I'd rather not if you please."*

*(Savishinky 1985)*

This shows the importance of recognising each resident in the care home as a unique individual with their own likes and dislikes. It also highlights the importance of understanding his/her life story. Enabling residents to interact with animals should be part of a person-centred approach to care. Any care home considering resident or visiting pets and animals should have an animal policy in place.



The findings from this work have been developed by the research team into an exciting new board game called **Pet Pursuit!** Based on the concept of Snakes & Ladders, care home staff can play the game to learn about the benefits of animals in residential homes. The game also highlights the issues that care homes need to consider when thinking about having resident or visiting animals or pets in the home. If you would like to have a go at playing the game, do get in touch.

Further details of all the studies that contributed to the review and the illustrative quotes provided can be found in the published paper available on the project webpage — scan this QR code to view.



This project was conducted by Noreen Orr, Becca Abbott, Alison Bethel, Sarah Paviour, Becky Whear, Ruth Garside and Jo Thompson Coon from the University of Exeter. The project is funded by the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration South West Peninsula (PenARC). The board game Pet Pursuit was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Social Policy Network Award. Game design and illustration was by **InkPot Graphics**.

The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

