



Pet therapy

DEMENTIA CARE

This evidence theme on pet therapy is a summary of one of the key topics identified by a scoping review of dementia research.

Key points

- Pet therapy is a guided, supervised interaction between a person and a trained animal for therapeutic purposes.
- Evidence from five systematic reviews found that pet therapy improved mood, response, engagement, and interaction, and reduced depression and the use of pain medication among people living with dementia.
- The impact of pet therapy on outcomes such as responsive behaviours, quality of life, and agitation was inconclusive.
- Studies that assessed the relationship between pet therapy and outcomes such as social functioning, and people's ability to manage self-care found no effect.

What is pet therapy?

Pet therapy (or animal-assisted therapy) is a complementary therapy that includes the use of animals as part of treatment. Pet therapy is designed to promote improvements in physical, social, emotional, or cognitive functions for people living with dementia, and can be provided in one-on-one or group settings. [1] Animals used in these interventions vary but often include dogs, cats, horses, aquatic animals, and sometimes robotic or toy animals. [2]

Is pet therapy effective?

We found five systematic reviews that examined the impact of pet therapy for people living with dementia. These reviews found improvements in:

- Mood [1-3]
- Response [2]
- Engagement [2]
- Interaction. [2]

As well as reductions in:

- Depression [1, 2, 4]
- The use of pain medication. [2]

The evidence of the effectiveness of pet therapy is inconclusive for:

- Responsive behaviours [1-3]
- Quality of life [1-3]
- Agitation [1, 3, 4]
- Anxiety. [5]

This is because some studies report the benefits of pet therapy for these outcomes, while others report no benefits. [1]

Currently, there is no clear evidence of benefit for:

- Social functioning [1]
- Ability to complete daily activities. [1]

In other words, studies have assessed the relationship between pet therapy and these outcomes, but no benefit was found.

One review compared the effects of live animals and toy/robotic animals. While engagement with live animals is often slightly different to toy/robotic animals, studies have shown no differences between the therapies across major outcomes (such as physical, social, emotional, or cognitive outcomes). [1]

Evidence limitations

The reviews highlighted concerns about the methods used in some of the studies. This reduces the degree of certainty we might have about the benefits of pet therapy. For example:

- Interventions were only conducted in residential care, so there was no evidence about how beneficial pet therapy may be for people living in the community.

- Some studies only had a small number of participants. [1, 3, 5]
- Potentially important outcomes were not assessed (adverse events, animal-related outcomes). [1]

What can an individual do?

- Be familiar with pet therapy and the potential benefits and limitations for people living with dementia.

What can the organisation do?

- Consider implementing a pet therapy program.
- Contact an accredited pet engagement organisation.

References

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Cite as: ARIIA Knowledge & Implementation Hub. Pet therapy: Dementia care. Evidence Theme. Adelaide, SA: ARIIA; 2022 [updated 2023 Jul].

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