

MANAGE YOUR RISK

Pet Therapy

Pet therapy is a broad term that includes animal-assisted therapy and other animal-assisted activities, including pet visitation. Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a growing field that uses dogs or other animals to help people recover from or better cope with health problems, such as heart disease, cancer and mental health disorders. Pet therapy programs are commonly used in senior living and hospice facilities.

Volunteer programs that bring animals and people together for companionship and therapy began in the 1970s, and continue to grow in popularity. As more technology is brought into healthcare, there is an increase in the perceived need for a “high touch” approach as well. The introduction of animals into the patient or resident’s environment is seen as a positive way of humanizing health care. While dogs are still the most common pet used in AAT, some organizations have expanded their programs to include animals such as rabbits, parrots, llamas, and even iguanas.

What are the Benefits of Pet Therapy?

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), some of the purported benefits of pet therapy include:

- Decreased physical pain
- Decreased emotional pain
- Reduced boredom
- Reduced anxiety
- Improved mood

AAT may be an ideal option for providing comfort to patients who may feel isolated in the hospice or senior living setting. A patient/resident at the end of life can receive comfort from the act of petting an animal. A patient with dementia can feel positive validation through this touch. Patients or residents who have had animals or love animals find the visits as a chance to reconnect to their positive past experiences.

What are the potential risks associated with Pet Therapy?

The biggest concern, particularly in a healthcare environment due to having vulnerable and sometimes high-risk patients or residents, is safety and sanitation. Most facilities that support a pet therapy program have defined rules or guidelines to ensure that the animals are clean, vaccinated, well trained and screened for appropriate behavior before being accepted into the care environment.

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Guidelines for Controlling Risk

A key factor in controlling the risk is to have good screening criteria for pets that are allowed to be a part of the program. A first step is to determine whether the animal and its handler have been properly screened, trained and certified. This is important due to the potential for injuries to patients/residents and employees from inappropriate handling, animal selection, lack of supervision or transmission of disease. Visiting animals need to be healthy (free of disease), social, calm, tolerant and friendly. The handler must also be specially trained, be completely familiar with their animal and understand the specific demands of the environment being visited.

In 2015, The Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America (SHEA) issued guidelines for healthcare facilities to follow when allowing animals on the premises. These guidelines are meant to keep patients safe from potential problems such as infection, bites or allergic reactions.

It is also recommended that animals included in a pet therapy program be certified by a therapy dog/animal organization such as Therapy Dogs International, Inc. (www.tdi-dog.org) or Therapet Animal-Assisted Therapy (www.therapet.org). Organizations such as these have health requirements for participating pets. These health requirements typically include:

- An annual checkup attested to by a Veterinarian within the past year.
- Mandatory Rabies Vaccine (1, 2, OR 3 YEAR - GIVEN BY A VETERINARIAN)
- An initial series of core Distemper, Hepatitis, and Parvovirus Vaccinations.
- A negative Fecal Exam within the past year.
- A negative Heartworm test within the past year if the dog is not on a continuous heartworm preventative medication. A negative Heartworm test must have been done within the previous two years if the dog is on an ongoing heartworm preventative medication.

It is a good idea to obtain a graduation certificate of basic obedience training, with a letter from the school attesting to the animal's temperament, as well as a letter of recommendation from the veterinarian. It is also suggested that each pet and handler that will be a part of the therapy program maintain volunteer files, which include documentation of the above requirements for their animal. All handlers should be screened in the same manner as any other volunteer and should also complete the volunteer orientation program to assure their familiarity with the organization and its policies/procedures.

Resources

Animal assisted therapy can provide valuable benefits to healthcare organizations and their patients/residents. While there are some potential risks associated with pet therapy, these risks can be controlled through strong policies/procedures, proper screening criteria and ongoing evaluation of all animals and handlers. Additional information regarding pet therapy is available through the following organizations.

American Veterinary Medicine Association | www.avma.org

The American Humane Association | www.americanhumane.org

The Society for Healthcare Epidemiology of America | www.shea-online.org

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