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Pets Can Bring Welcome Smiles to Seniors

By Fatima Shell-Sanchez, RN, Visiting Nurse Service of New York

Companion animals bring great joy to their owners.

The unconditional love cats and dogs provide appeals to people of all ages. While many people associate pets with kids who can't wait to welcome the first cat or dog into their homes, pets can benefit aging men and women as well.

Fatima Shell-Sanchez, R.N. with VNSNY CHOICE Health Plans says, "It's not uncommon for seniors to feel lonely or depressed when they retire, their children move away or they lose a spouse or close friend or friends. The American Humane Society states that studies show pets help seniors overcome loneliness and depression by providing affection, company and entertainment. Pets also provide much-needed mental stimulation, and many pet owners find their pets help them become more physically active as well.

Seniors who adopt pets may also feel a sense of purpose when helping animals who may not have anywhere to live. This is particularly true of older companion animals, which many young families are understandably hesitant to adopt. Mature pets might be an ideal fit for seniors. When seniors are looking to adopt a pet, there are various reasons why older pets or particular animals might be the perfect fit for them.

- Adult pets may already be house trained, saving seniors the trouble and effort of training them.
- Seniors may find cats fit their lifestyles more than dogs, as cats are less active and do not need to be walked or played with as much as dogs. Cats also are small and easily maneuverable, meaning even seniors who have arthritis or other physical limitations can easily care for cats. Many cats are also content to spend long periods of time sleeping on their owners' laps.
- Small dogs that can live inside might be a good idea as well, especially for homebound seniors. They're also easily transported to and from vet appointments. To reduce risk of falls, choose a pet that does not require walking on a leash.

Shell-Sanchez emphasizes that while pets do make great companions and help soothe feelings of loneliness and isolation, it is important that seniors and their caretakers carefully weigh the benefits of adopting a pet against any limitations they may have. Having a backup plan for care is always helpful. Seniors should not adopt a pet if they anticipate frequent travel or medical care that requires they be away from home for long periods of time.