WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION
Advancing Skills in the Delivery of Personalized, Proactive, Patient-Driven Care

Animal-Assisted Therapies
Clinical Tool

This document has been written for clinicians. The content was developed by the Integrative Medicine Program, Department of Family Medicine, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health in cooperation with Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, under contract to the Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, Veterans Health Administration.

Information is organized according to the diagram above, the Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being. While conventional treatments may be covered to some degree, the focus is on other areas of Whole Health that are less likely to be covered elsewhere and may be less familiar to most readers. There is no intention to dismiss what conventional care has to offer. Rather, you are encouraged to learn more about other approaches and how they may be used to complement conventional care. The ultimate decision to use a given approach should be based on many factors, including patient preferences, clinician comfort level, efficacy data, safety, and accessibility. No one approach is right for everyone; personalizing care is of fundamental importance.
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Clinical Tool

This clinical tool focuses on the health benefits of pet ownership and, more specifically, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and their potential uses in Whole Health care. This tool provides some overall background on AAT and discusses how clinicians can follow the ECHO mnemonic (Efficacy, Costs, Harms, Opinions). See the Deciding if an Approach Is Worth Using: The E.C.H.O. Mnemonic clinical tool to help them do the following:

- Educate patients about the therapeutic value of pet ownership and AAT
- Make informed referrals for AAT in one’s community, or incorporate AAT into their hospital or clinic setting
- Explore its relevance for one’s own self-care

Animals and Health: A Background

Most clinicians have encountered a patient with a service dog, seen a therapy dog at their workplace, or experienced the healing power of animal companionship themselves. For many people, animals are central to their overall health.

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, in 2012, 36.5% of American households owned dogs, 30.4% owned cats, and 1.5% owned horses.¹

The biophilia hypothesis holds that human beings are genetically predisposed to have an affinity with other organisms. The hygiene hypothesis holds that being around pets leads to exposures to allergens that strengthen the immune system, so being around animals, especially as a child, can give rise to certain health benefits.²

Humans have been connected with animals since before recorded history, as is evidenced by cave paintings from around the world. The first documented use of animals therapeutically was in ninth-century Belgium, where people with disabilities were asked to care for farm animals. Animals were used in the 1700s at the York Retreat, a progressive “lunatic asylum” for its times. In the 1800s, Florence Nightingale recommended animals as companions for the infirm.

There are several contexts in which animals can contribute to health:³

- As pets
- As resident animals, living in a facility and cared for by its staff, residents, or volunteers
- As service animals—examples include dogs that assist blind people
- As pets that visit people with no specific therapeutic goal on the agenda—known as animal-assisted activities (AAAs)
WHOLE HEALTH: CHANGE THE CONVERSATION  
Clinical Tool: Animal-Assisted Therapies

- As the focus of animal-assisted therapy—which is the use of an animal in a therapeutic setting to bring about a specific set of goals (AAT can be provided in multiple different settings, to groups or individuals; it is delivered under the supervision of a trained human service provider)

The term *animal-facilitated therapy* may be used to include both AAT and AAA.⁴

**Use patterns**
The VA's 2011 Healthcare Analysis Information Group (HAIG) survey found that 35 of 141 VA systems offer AAT for Veterans.⁵ Aside from acupuncture and a number of mind-body approaches, AAT is one of the most commonly used complementary approaches available to Veterans. In the HAIG report, AAT is categorized as a mind-body approach.

**Licensure and education**
Most states allow animals to enter health care facilities—except in food preparation and serving areas or in places where conditions must remain sterile. Some states require health certificates for animals. Within the VA, many of these programs are using volunteers, who also go through a strict intake process and background check. Many programs, including many online academic institutions, offer training in AAT. On course completion, a person might receive a Certification in Animals and Human Health or one of many other AAT degrees. The website [http://www.animaltherapy.net](http://www.animaltherapy.net) contains a number of links to certification courses and therapy dog training programs.

**Efficacy**

Of course, most people do not need research to convince them that pets and other companion animals enrich our lives, but studies do confirm what we instinctively know—they do. One way they help is at a social level; for example, kids in wheelchairs receive more positive attention from other people when they are accompanied by service dogs.⁶

**Physiological effects**
Connections between humans and dogs affect both species. Oxytocin and other hormones linked to affection, behavior, and empathy increase. Beta-endorphins, dopamine, prolactin, and other substances also increase for both. A dog-human relationship decreases cortisol levels for both as well; this likely indicates that the dog-human relationship has the potential to decrease stress levels in both.⁷

**Clinical studies of pet ownership**
Pet owners—particularly dog owners—exercise more and have lower cardiac disease risk.⁸ Dog owners also, according to many studies, have lower blood pressure, total cholesterol, and triglyceride levels. Cats have their benefits too. The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey Mortality Follow-Up of 4,435 Americans from ages 30 to 75 found that cat ownership led to a 30% reduction in the risk of fatal heart attacks.⁹ Other studies have not shown positive relationships,¹⁰ but overall, there seems to be benefit. A study conducted on a geriatric rehabilitation unit found that when caged birds were introduced
to the facility, patients had improved focus, enhanced social interactions, and left their rooms more frequently. Horses help too. The Seaside Horses for Heroes Program found that caring for and riding horses regularly helped a group of Veterans enhance communication, confidence, and assertiveness.

**Reviews of AAT**
Overall, studies of AAT show a favorable benefit. A 2011 review of multiple studies concluded, “Overall, ownership of domestic pets, particularly dogs, is associated with positive health benefits.” There are theories that this is due to improvements in mood and emotional state, as well as changes in autonomic activity and endothelial function, which equates, among other things, to lower blood pressure and fewer cardiac arrhythmias. A 2013 review of equine (horse-related) therapies concluded, “In the aggregate, the evidence is promising in support of the effectiveness of complementary and adjunct interventions employing equines in the treatment of health challenges. Further studies are needed…”

Furthermore, a 2012 review concluded that, in addition to many clear benefits for hospitalized children, AAT also has social, mental, psychological, and emotional benefits for hospitalized adults. The review found that:

- Cancer patients reported that AAT lowered their anxiety and distracted them in positive ways from the hospital environment.
- People living with mental illnesses—including schizophrenia and behavioral and mood disorders—had improved quality of life, self-efficacy, and ability to cope. They also experienced more social engagement.

Natural Standard, a website that comprehensively reviews the literature related to complementary and integrative medicine topics, gave pet therapy (their term) a “Good Scientific Evidence” rating as far as enhancing patients’ quality of life. The review concluded that research was “Conflicting or Unclear” for AAT for Alzheimer's, hypertension, loneliness in the elderly, mental illness, pain in children, anxiety, and depression regarding invasive medical procedures.

**Costs**
Costs of animal-related therapies vary. A Veteran may or may not be able to meet the expenses of keeping a pet. There are a number of groups that attempt to support Veterans’ being able to obtain support animals. See the “Resources” section below.

**Harms**
Pet ownership and animal-assisted therapies are quite safe overall. Scratches and bites are extremely rare, but appropriate supervision always should be provided for animal-facilitated activities. Frail elderly patients, people who are prone to infection, and immune-
compromised people may be at risk in some circumstances. Zoonotic infection risk and allergies should be borne in mind, but again, these are rare. Of course, it also should be ensured that pets and therapy animals are treated humanely and not placed in danger. Therapists who provide AAT should be appropriately credentialed and comfortable working in health care settings.

Not all Veterans will be interested, and the decision to use AAT must be individualized based on patient needs.

**Opinions**

Overall, hospital staff tend to appreciate the benefits of AAT, though they may be skeptical before seeing it introduced into a hospital setting. As noted above, AAT is particularly prevalent in VA facilities; many Veterans benefit from its availability. People who seem to do the best with AAT are those who had experiences with animals as children, so it may be helpful to ask about previous pet ownership and childhood experiences with animals when taking a patient history. For many people, pets are members of their family.

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**Animal-Assisted Therapy Tips from an Integrative Medicine Clinician**

*I am always struck by how much the presence of a therapy animal will enliven a waiting area or hospital room. The VA, perhaps more than any organization, recognizes the potential value of AAT. It is worth finding out what resources are available in your area. Do not forget to look for equine therapy centers, which are becoming increasingly common. Sometimes a Veteran who is not a “people person” will feel much more at ease with a dog or other animal.*
### Additional Resources

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<th>Organization</th>
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<td>Animal Therapy</td>
<td>Contains a number of links to certification courses and therapy dog programs.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.animaltherapy.net">http://www.animaltherapy.net</a></td>
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| Pet Partners (formerly the Delta Society) | Nonprofit organization that compiles research results and trains volunteers and their pets (dogs, mainly) for participation in animal-assisted activities and animal-assisted therapy throughout the United States and other countries. | [http://www.petpartners.org/](http://www.petpartners.org/)  
  Phone: (425) 679-5500 |
| Therapy Dog Certification | Provides links to six organizations that provide therapy dogs for Veterans. | [http://www.therapydogcertification.com/6-organizations-that-provide-therapy-dogs-for-veterans/](http://www.therapydogcertification.com/6-organizations-that-provide-therapy-dogs-for-veterans/) |

### Book

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### Whole Health: Change the Conversation Website

Interested in learning more about Whole Health?  
Browse our website for information on personal and professional care.


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### References


