

# How Pets Contribute to Healthy Aging: Benefits, Challenges, and Changing Perceptions

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INSTITUTE FOR HEALTHCARE  
POLICY AND INNOVATION  
**NATIONAL POLL  
ON HEALTHY AGING**  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

## Key Findings

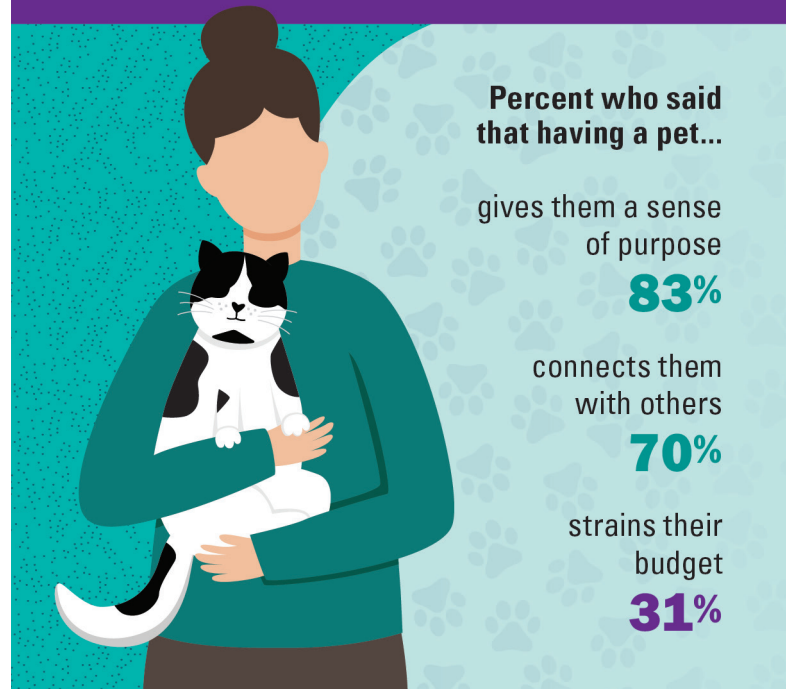
- 55% of adults age 50 and older said they have a pet, most commonly dogs (70%) and cats (50%).
- 83% of pet owners age 50 and older said their pets give them a sense of purpose, and 71% said their pets help them enjoy life.
- 31% of pet owners age 50 and older agreed that having a pet strains their budget.
- Compared with pet owners age 50–80 in 2018, those in 2025 were less likely to report that having a pet helps them enjoy life, feel loved, or reduce stress.

Pets can support healthy aging by offering companionship and contributing to physical, mental, and social well-being. While often beneficial, having a pet is also a major commitment of time, money, and effort that can be especially difficult for people who have other care responsibilities or serious health concerns. In September 2025, the University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging asked a national sample of adults age 50 and older about their pets, perceived benefits and challenges of having a pet, and reasons for not having a pet. This report also compares responses with the [2018 National Poll on Healthy Aging survey](#) on the same topic.

## Pets in the lives of older adults

Overall, 55% of adults age 50 and older said they have a pet. Those age 50–64 were more likely to have a pet (64% age 50–64 vs. 46% age 65+), as were those who live with others (60% live with others vs. 43% live alone).

## Pets provide many older adults with purpose and connection, but can contribute to financial strain



The majority of older adults with pets have dogs (70%), followed by cats (50%). Fewer reported having fish (6%), birds (4%), large mammals (e.g., horses, sheep, pigs) (3%), small mammals (e.g., rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters) (3%), reptiles (1%), or another kind of pet (2%). Among pet owners, 31% said they have more than one kind of pet (e.g., a dog and a cat).

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### How pets can be helpful

More than half of pet owners age 50 and older reported that having a pet offers benefits in their day-to-day lives. For example, having a pet:

- gives them a sense of purpose (83%)
- helps them enjoy life (71%)
- connects them with others (70%)
- makes them feel loved (64%)
- reduces stress (63%)

Pet owners also said having a pet helps them:

- be physically active (44%)
- stick to a routine (44%)
- cope with physical or emotional symptoms (35%)

### Financial challenges with pet ownership

Overall, 31% of pet owners age 50 and older agreed that having a pet strains their budget. Those more likely to say pets strain their budget included women, individuals with annual household incomes of less than \$60,000, those reporting fair or poor

physical health, those reporting fair or poor mental health, and individuals with a disability that limits daily activities.

### Reasons for not having pets

People age 50 and older without pets said their main reasons for not having a pet were:

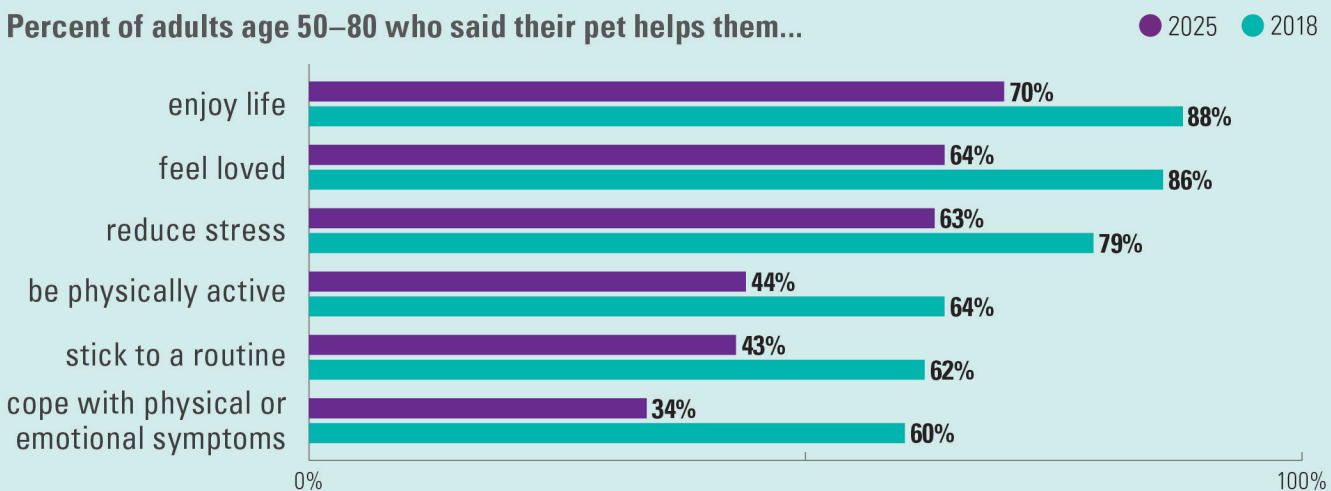
- Not wanting to be tied down (46%)
- Just choosing not to have a pet (36%)
- Cost (33%)

Other main reasons for not having a pet included:

- Not being interested in pets (19%)
- Not having time to care for a pet (19%)
- Too messy (18%)
- Allergies (their own or a household member’s) (16%)
- Their pet recently died (15%)
- Not being healthy enough to take care of a pet (7%)
- Pets not allowed where they live (6%)
- Another reason (8%)

## Fewer pet owners reported benefits of having a pet in 2025 compared with 2018

Percent of adults age 50–80 who said their pet helps them...



## Trends in pet ownership: 2025 vs. 2018

We compared older adults' responses in the 2025 poll with findings from our [2018 poll](#) on the same topic. Because our 2018 survey was administered to adults age 50–80 only, comparisons in this section are limited to that age range. Given the limited age range included in this analysis, there may be small variations in the 2025 findings highlighted in this section as compared with those reported earlier in this report. Note that the 2018 and 2025 surveys went to different sets of older adults.

Overall, rates of pet ownership (57% in 2025 vs. 55% in 2018) and types of pets among adults age 50–80 were similar in 2018 and 2025; dog ownership (71% in 2025 vs. 68% in 2018) and cat ownership (50% in 2025 vs. 48% in 2018) remained relatively stable across these two time points.

### Shifting perceptions of pet ownership from 2018 to 2025

Pet owners age 50–80 in 2025 were more likely than those in 2018 to agree that having a pet gives them a sense of purpose (83% in 2025 vs. 73% in 2018).

Yet, pet owners age 50–80 in 2025 were less likely than their counterparts in 2018 to say that having a pet helps them:

- enjoy life (70% in 2025 vs. 88% in 2018)
- feel loved (64% in 2025 vs. 86% in 2018)
- reduce stress (63% in 2025 vs. 79% in 2018)
- be physically active (44% in 2025 vs. 64% in 2018)
- stick to a routine (43% in 2025 vs. 62% in 2018)
- cope with physical or emotional symptoms (34% in 2025 vs. 60% in 2018)

Pet owners in 2025 were also more likely than their 2018 counterparts to agree that having a pet strains their budgets (31% in 2025 vs. 18% in 2018).

Consistent with these findings, adults age 50–80 in 2025 were more likely than those in 2018 to cite specific barriers to pet ownership. Compared with 2018, higher proportions of adults age 50–80 in 2025 reported that they do not have pets due to the cost (33% in 2025 vs. 21% in 2018), lack of time to

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## Pet owners age 50–80 in 2025 were more likely to say that having a pet strains their budget than pet owners age 50–80 in 2018.

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care for a pet (20% in 2025 vs. 15% in 2018), or not being healthy enough to take care of a pet (6% in 2025 vs. 2% in 2018).

### Implications

This poll shows that pets can offer older adults meaningful health and well-being benefits, including social connection and a sense of purpose. Having a pet in one's life can also encourage physical activity and reduce stress. However, having a pet also requires time, flexibility, and financial resources; personal preferences and cost were older adults' main reasons for not wanting a pet.

Our poll results also suggest that older adults' experiences with pet ownership have changed over time. Although a greater share of pet owners in 2025 reported that pets give them a sense of purpose compared with 2018, fewer reported benefits related to enjoyment of life, feeling loved, stress reduction, physical activity, sticking to a routine, and coping with physical or emotional symptoms. These changes, along with a higher percentage saying that pets contribute to financial strain, may reflect broader shifts in experiences of aging, health and well-being, household composition, financial pressures, social factors, work and other responsibilities, or the increasing demands of pet care as people and pets age.

**Older adults** thinking about getting a new pet should consider the types of companion animals that

would best suit their lifestyle, activity level, and health needs. Specific considerations include the size of the pet and how much care is required in terms of walking and training. Another issue is how easy it might be to leave the pet for an extended period, either on a day-to-day basis or when traveling. Financial resources are also an important consideration because food, medicine, veterinary care, and related services like dog walking and boarding are costly. Finally, a pet could live for many years, so older adults should think about how their lives might change in 5, 10, or even 15 years and whether these changes could impact their ability to care for a pet in the long-term. For some older adults, fostering, pet sitting, or spending time with a friend's or family member's pet may offer companionship and other benefits without the full responsibilities that go along with having one's own pet.

**Health care professionals** should understand that for many older adults, companion animals are not just pets, but members of the family. Sometimes caring for a pet can be a barrier to receiving recommended medical care for older adults or following recommended care plans. For example, a patient might be hesitant to have surgery if there is no one to care for their pet while they recover, and they may be concerned about the well-being of their

pet during a hospitalization. It is therefore important that health care professionals ask older adults if they have any pets at home that they care for. Involving social workers, neighbors, friends, and family members can help address these concerns and support the health and well-being of older adults and their pets.

All in all, pets can bring many benefits to older adults, and decisions about having a pet in one's life, especially when considering getting a new pet, should consider current circumstances and future needs. Findings from this report suggest that pets remain an important source of support for many older adults. Helping older adults experience the benefits of having pets, while addressing barriers, can be a meaningful way to support healthy aging.

## Data Source and Methods

This National Poll on Healthy Aging report presents findings from a national household survey conducted exclusively by NORC at the University of Chicago for the University of Michigan Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation. This survey was administered online and by phone from September 3rd–29th, 2025, to a randomly selected, stratified group of U.S. adults age 50–95 (n=2,698). The survey completion rate was 51% among panel members invited to participate. The margin of error is  $\pm 1$  to 3 percentage points for questions asked of the full sample and higher among subgroups. Percentages in this report may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Findings from the National Poll on Healthy Aging do not represent the opinions of the University of Michigan. The University of Michigan reserves all rights over this material.

Read [past National Poll on Healthy Aging reports](#) and [about the poll methodology](#).

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