

A guide to keeping pets happy when you're unwell





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01. Introduction

Pets are wonderful in so many ways, giving back much more than they get through companionship, social connectedness and health-boosting benefits.

Pets can also provide comfort when we're feeling unwell, and some may even help keep an eye on the house when we're out.

However, getting older unfortunately means we're more likely to suffer an injury, illness or disease.¹ This creates practical problems for older pet owners and leaves many wondering, "What will happen to my pet if I become unwell?"

The health benefits of owning a pet

- ✓ Increased physical activity and cardiovascular health,²
- ✓ For people living alone, owning a dog may decrease risk of death by 33 per cent and risk of cardiovascular-related death by 36 per cent,³
- ✓ Fewer visits to the doctor,
- ✓ Pet owners report less depression and appear to cope with stress and grief better.⁴

¹ Risk factors of ill health among older people – WHO

² Dog ownership and the risk of cardiovascular disease and death – a nationwide cohort study – Nature

³ Want to live longer? Get a dog – CNN

⁴ What are the health benefits of pet ownership? – RSPCA



02. Unplanned short-term options

We don't plan to suffer a fall or become unwell, so often the need for someone to step in and look after a pet takes us by surprise.

If you have friends, neighbours or family nearby who know your pet and can provide short-term care, this is a great option – you'll have the peace of mind of knowing that your pet is in good hands, and your pet may already be familiar with their temporary carer.

If you are a Facebook user, join a local community group and extend your network of neighbours and people nearby who may be able help out at short notice.

[Pet insurance](#) is also handy in this situation, providing for emergency boarding for your pet if you are its sole carer and you are hospitalised for more than five days in a row.





03. Planned short-term options

If you have a scheduled hospital visit coming up and don't have anyone who is able to help out at that time, consider your local pet boarding options.

Investigate available options by:

- Asking for recommendations from local pet owners, vets and pet shops,
- Googling "pet boarding",
- Looking for a pet sitter in local classifieds and through online options such as Pawshake and MadPaws.

Boarding options are varied, so you'll need to consider your budget, the age and temperament of your pet, your pet's activity levels and any special needs before deciding on the right option for you and your pet. Of course, if your pet insurance policy includes cover for emergency boarding of your pet, you should contact your insurer to discuss how this can be arranged.

Some questions you might need to ask potential pet sitters and boarding facilities include:

1. How far in advance do I need to book?
2. What vaccinations are required?
3. What is a typical day like for a pet at the boarding facility?
4. How much personal attention will my pet get?
5. What will I need to bring?
6. Can I have a tour of the accommodation?
7. What are the drop-off and pick-up times?
8. Do you have any references from other pet owners?

AUSTRALIANS LOVE PETS

Australia has one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world, with 62 per cent of households having a pet and 13 per cent planning to get a pet in the next 12 months. There are an estimated 24 million pets across the country, and most (59%) Australians who don't currently have a pet would like to own one in the future. Our favourite pets are:

- ✓ Dogs (38 per cent of Australian households have a dog),
- ✓ Cats (29 per cent of Australian households have a cat),
- ✓ Birds (4.2 million pet birds in Australia),

Horses, rabbits, guinea pigs, reptiles and other small mammals (2.5 million in Australia in total).⁵



⁵ How many pets are there in Australia? – RSPCA



04. Longer term help: support organisations

If your health circumstances change, you may need to seriously consider whether you can afford the ongoing care of your pet.

If your budget or personal situation doesn't provide the help you need with your pet in the longer term, there are some support organisations that may be able to step in and assist so you can keep your pet.

[Animal Care for Seniors at Home](#) (ACSAH) is one group of volunteers whose very mission is to "achieve healthier, happier pets while supporting ageing or frail residents who might be struggling to keep up with the requirements of caring for a pet in their own home." ACSAH volunteers will help walk, wash and care for your pet in your own home.

RSPCA's [Community Aged Care program](#) also "aims to keep pets and their elderly owners happy,

healthy and together in their own homes for as long as possible." To be eligible, you must be a pet owner over the age of 65 (or 50 for Indigenous pet owners) or a palliative care patient of any age. You should also ask family and friends first whether they are able to assist with your pet's care.

Support from the RSPCA can include:

- Temporary foster accommodation,
- Emergency pet boarding,
- Assistance with veterinary treatment and transport to and from a vet clinic,
- Home visits for basic pet care,
- Pet grooming,
- Dog walking.



DID YOU KNOW?

PETS AND AGED CARE FACILITIES

Less than one in five aged care facilities allow residents to live with a pet,⁶ however the [Animal Welfare League Australia](#) is promoting pet-friendly policies in aged care and can provide information and resources for people looking to move into aged care facilities with a pet.

⁶ Allow aged care residents to keep pets: welfare groups – Australian Ageing Agenda



05. Be prepared

There's no question that pets are an important and often wonderful part of our lives. They can even provide comfort that no one else can when we're unwell. However, when you have health issues, pets can also become a burden, adding to your worries.

There are ways to ease this burden, though, by planning ahead.

1. Prepare for the years ahead

Have a list of go-to people and organisations that you can call on in emergencies and write down your pet's schedule, feeding plan and any medications so they have the information on hand.

If you anticipate needing some assistance because of declining health, contact the support people and organisations mentioned above to find out how you can arrange ongoing help.

2. Pet insurance

[Pet insurance](#) is increasingly important as you get older and can come in handy if you're sick – and also if your pet's health declines.

Look for a policy that covers your pet's boarding costs if you are hospitalised. Pet insurance also generally covers between 80–100 per cent of your eligible vet bills following an accident or illness (though there are limits to the amount you can claim each year).

3. Think before taking on a pet

Before taking on a pet, it's important to be sure you can provide a safe and loving environment for it, no matter how old you are.

Ask yourself these key questions:

- What will it cost to look after this type of pet (food, bedding, grooming, vet costs and more), and can I afford it?
- What are the basic needs of this type of pet, and can I provide for them?
- Does my lifestyle suit this type of pet?
- Do I have time to train the pet?
- Are my living arrangements suited to this type of pet?
- Will I be able to look after this pet its entire life?

Be honest when answering these questions, and remember that if you're not in a position to have a pet yourself there are other options. Why not ask friends and family if they need a little break from their pet so you can enjoy time with a furry friend? Or you could be the person to provide care for other people's pets in emergencies?

4. Keep on top of your pet's health

- It's important to follow basic hygiene and care rules for the health of both you and your pet:
- Wash your hands after handling your pet,
- Keep your pet's nails trimmed (this can be

important in reducing scratches, which can become infected),

- Keep your pet tick-free and flea-free,
- Wear rubber gloves when cleaning up your pet's waste,
- Keep your dog leashed when outside the home to avoid injury from other animals and exposure to diseases,
- Don't feed your pet anything except commercial pet food,
- Keep your pet's living and eating areas clean.

Dogs vs cats

Which makes the best pet for older Australians?

CATS

- ✓ Relatively low-maintenance,
- ✓ Suitable for those who can't get out for a walk every day,
- ✓ Independent nature means they're easier to care for,
- ✓ Cats are generally clean and easily house-trained.

DOGS

- ✓ Can be trained,
- ✓ You can choose a breed to suit your lifestyle,
- ✓ Encourage you to get outdoors and stay active,
- ✓ "Man's best friend": they're known to be great companions.

⁵ How many pets are there in Australia? – RSPCA



Checklist

A handy checklist to help ensure your pet is prepared for both short-term and long-term care.

☐ My pet's feeding plan:

☐ My pet's daily schedule:

☐ My pet's special needs:

☐ My pet's medication:

☐ My pet's vaccination history:

☐ People and organisations who can provide emergency care for my pet:

☐ People and organisations who can assist on an ongoing basis:

To find out more about our [pet insurance](#) and other products that can help you manage life's uncertainties, chat to our friendly customer service team today on 13 13 43.

Notes