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Pets, Support, and Service Animals for People with Cancer

For some people with cancer, animals can provide comfort and support and may help them cope better with their emotions. Animals can fill different roles, each with its own benefits and challenges.

Pets and companion animals

Many people find that pets provide company and comfort. In fact, having a pet can provide support and help you cope with having cancer. However, there are some things to think about if you have or are thinking about getting a pet.

Tell your cancer care team about any pets you have and your routines for caring for them. They can help you figure out whether your pet might pose [safety concerns for you during cancer treatment](#)¹. It's also a good idea to visit your pet's veterinarian to find out what kinds of illness your pet might pass to you during times when your immune system is weak.

You may also need to take steps to protect your pets when you are home during or after cancer treatment. Be careful to keep any trash or body waste away from pets for 48-72 hours after receiving [chemotherapy](#)². Keep the toilet lid down when you're not using it to keep pets from drinking the water. If you are receiving [systemic radiation](#)³, you may need to avoid contact with pets for a period of time.

One other important thing to think about: Make sure you have someone who can take care of your pets if you get too sick or have to be in the hospital. Keep written instructions for feeding, cleaning, toileting, medicines, and veterinary contacts ready if needed.

Also know that there are restrictions on where pets can go. They are not usually allowed to go into health care settings.

Emotional support animals

An emotional support animal (ESA) provides comfort just by being with a person. However, unlike a pet, the purpose of having an ESA is to help a person deal with specific mental health issues. For an animal to be considered an ESA, a person must have a prescription from a mental health provider. Most often, ESAs are ordered for anxiety disorders, major depression, or panic attacks. These problems are experienced quite often by people with cancer.

ESAs can be any small animal that might be kept in your home as a pet. Dogs and cats are the most common ESAs. ESAs do not require specific training or certification, but must be able to behave properly in all situations. When choosing an ESA, look for an animal that is calm and easy to control. Animals that are likely to get upset or are hard to control around other people will probably not be a good choice.

ESAs might be allowed to go with their owners into some health care settings. The owner will likely need a letter from a doctor or psychiatrist to do so. However, most cancer care settings have rules about animals coming with owners. If you would like to bring an ESA into a cancer care facility, contact the facility ahead of time. Let them know why you feel the need to bring the animal, see what their policies are, and ask whether they can allow your request.

Service animals

Service animals (most often dogs) are trained to work with or do certain tasks for someone with a physical, sensory, or mental disability. For example, a service animal may guide for someone who is blind, alert a person with diabetes when their blood sugar levels are too high or low, remind a person with depression to take their medication, or assist a person in a wheel chair.

Service animals are specially trained to do certain work or tasks that go beyond providing comfort. While there is no certification process or standardized training recognized under the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#)⁴, the [American Kennel Club](#)⁵ provides guidance on choosing and training a service dog. If you have a disability that qualifies you for a service animal, you will need to either work with a service animal training organization or train one yourself.

Service animals are allowed to go almost anywhere with their owner, even places where

animals are often not allowed. If you have a service animal and will be going to a cancer care facility, contact the health care provider ahead of time to let them know.

It is important to know that there are times when service animals may not be allowed. And if the animal is causing problems or the owner cannot provide full care or control the animal, the owner may be asked to remove the animal.

Can dogs smell cancer?

There have been news reports about people whose cancer was found after a change in their dog's behavior. This led some researchers to study whether dogs can smell cancer on the skin, in urine, or on a person's breath. A few small studies have been done, but with different results. More research is needed to decide whether dogs can be helpful in detecting cancer in more people.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/physical-side-effects/low-blood-counts/infections/safety.html
2. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/chemotherapy/chemotherapy-safety.html
3. www.cancer.org/treatment/treatments-and-side-effects/treatment-types/radiation/safety.html
4. <http://ada.gov>
5. <http://akc.org>
6. www.akc.org/
7. www.ada.gov/
8. www.akc.org/
9. www.ada.gov/

Additional Resources

American Kennel Club Website: [akc.org \(www.akc.org/\)](http://www.akc.org/)⁶

Provides recommendations for choosing and training a service dog. Describes the differences between service, working, therapy and emotional support dogs.

United States Department of Justice Website: [ada.gov \(www.ada.gov/\)](http://www.ada.gov/)⁷ Toll-free

telephone number: 800-514-0301

Based on the Americans with Disabilities Act, provides a definition of the term "service animal" and the federal regulations related to them.

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United States Department of Transportation. U.S. Department of Transportation Announces Final Rule on Traveling by Air with Service Animals. <https://www.transportation.gov/briefing-room/us-department-transportation-announces-final-rule-traveling-air-service-animals>. Updated December 2, 2020. Accessed December 7, 2020.

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