

COVER STORY

Puppy love

How do you handle the change of lifestyle heading into retirement? Filling your days with loving a little furry friend could help! **Jessica Goulburn** caught up with animal lovers and experts to get the lowdown on how to find the perfect pet.

Companionship. Loyalty. Unconditional love. Most people who own a pet will list these as three of the main reasons for having an animal. Animals do not judge, they don't expect anything but food, water and love, and they make their owners feel needed. A pet can also provide a range of health benefits.

With 33 million pets registered in Australia, it's clear that animals have a significant impact on our lives. According to the Australian Companion Animal Council (ACAC), of Australia's eight million households, 2.9 million or 36 per cent, include a dog, 1.8 million house a cat, and there are approximately 18.4 million fish, just over eight million birds and over one million other pets including horses, guinea pigs and rabbits.

Healthy pets, healthy lives

Research has shown that there is a direct relationship between owning a pet and improved overall health, which can be exceptionally beneficial to people as they get older. Experts believe that the impact companion animals have on owners' health is largely the result of lower stress levels, meaning the impact or incidence of any condition that is caused or exacerbated by high stress levels could be lowered by pet ownership.

In the early 1980s, a study found that pet owners were less likely to die in the 12 months following a heart attack than non-pet owners. This was tested again in the 90s, finding the initial results accurate.

The act of petting a dog or a cat has a calming effect. Dr Peter Higgins, veterinarian and Dogs NSW spokesperson, was involved in a study that looked at how pets can help their owners medically, as well as help people in hospital recovering from surgery or illness, and people in nursing homes.

"Petting a dog can decrease your blood pressure quite significantly," Dr Higgins says. "The study also found that people had an increased zest for life after they had spent time with a dog."

A 1992 study revealed that pet owners had lower levels of risk factors for heart disease, including lower blood pressure and lower cholesterol, while »



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Gary, Judi and Bella Blackler

After losing all of their animals in the middle of last year, Gary and Judi Blackler thought they would take a break from having a pet. They lasted six months.

"A dear friend of mine sent me a will, written by a dog," Judi explains. "It said: 'Don't go into a store and buy a puppy; adopt a dog and give it the love that you gave me.'"

"So in December, I started looking on Pet Rescue and I found Bella," Judi explains. Not willing to wait a month for Bella to get to Sydney, Gary and Judi travelled almost 600km to Narrandera, popped Bella in the car and drove her home where she melted hearts instantly.

"The first night we were home, she hopped straight into her bed and the next minute, she was on her back, fast asleep. I thought: 'she's home'. She's a very good dog; she's taken a chunk out of our hearts already."

Judi and Gary couldn't stand to lose another dog so quickly so they opted for a mature, but young dog. At just two and a half, Bella has a playful nature but is very obedient, responsive and trusting.

With Gary out and about with Probus, Judi loves having her around. "I could not do without the company of the dog; she fills a gap," she says. "I needed the companionship."

"She has settled into this house, she is just such an adorable little thing and yet she's still puppy-like and loves a play," Gary says. "You lose them, and you think you can never find another one to replace them. But along comes a little dog with its own personality. We enjoy one another in retirement."



an English study has also shown that minor illnesses and complaints were reduced in people who owned pets, and that owners of dogs were more physically active.

Pros and cons

There are definite positives of owning a pet, however, there are other things to consider when deciding whether a pet is the right addition to your life.

If you travel a lot, you must consider how your pet will cope in your absence or, if it is to accompany you, how it will cope with being away from home. "There are a number of pet-friendly hotels now around Australia," Dr Higgins says, "so even if you do go on a trip, in some cases you can take your dog or pet with you." Either way, you need to assess the extra costs you may incur.

There is also the daily commitment you have to make to a pet, including being home to feed it, groom it and entertain it. Falling in love with a gorgeous pet is one thing,

committing to its needs is what is really important.

So, which pet?

As long as the pet you choose interests you, the therapeutic benefit is there. However, it is important that the pet you have selected fits your personality, lifestyle and living space.

"If you're active, then by all means get an active dog," says Dr Higgins. "Take it out for a run with you."

But if you're not active, there are over 200 breeds of dog in Australia, and then there are cats too, so there are plenty of options." If you choose a pet that suits your lifestyle you're not going to go wrong.

Most pets, especially dogs, need structure in their day and space to spread out and play. However, don't be deterred just because you live in a small space or a rental property. Often, it is not the size of the backyard or the apartment that matters, it is finding the right pet



– dogs and cats successfully live in highly urbanised areas – and making sure you care for and manage it well in the space that you have.

“If you’re living in a unit, you could get a small dog, a cat or a budgie,” Dr Higgins advises.

There are also certain expenses that accompany a pet and the initial purchase is probably going to be the least amount of money you pay.

Breed-specific rescues will be able to provide pedigree details of some surrendered dogs.

“The cost of a pet is ongoing for its entire life, so you need to be able to factor that in. You have to get pet food, there’s medical attention with veterinarians, bedding, there’s ongoing care,” Dr Higgins says. You need to be

able to care for your pet financially for an extended period of time.

Another consideration is how much time you have to commit to your pet. A dog, for example, requires lots of attention and activity. You need to be there to feed your dog, walk it frequently and keep it entertained. A cat, on the other hand, is usually quite content to keep itself amused. If you don’t have much time to spare, you may also want to consider the bird, reptile or fish option. These pets provide companionship, just in a different way. They are mostly dependent on you for their livelihood and they need your love and care.

Bringing your pet home

There are so many places to find a pet that it can be hard to know where to start. Buying a dog or cat from a reputable, registered breeder gives you the opportunity to visit the facility and gather all relevant information including where your pet comes from and what the future holds. »

OWNING AN EXOTIC PET

SNAKES

Pros

- Content keeping to themselves.
- Can be left alone for extended periods.
- Quiet and won’t damage your furniture.



Cons:

- Cost of upkeep can be high.
- Safety. It may be fascinating to own a pet with fangs, but playtime could end painfully.

MACAW

Pros

- Can be very affectionate, especially when hand-fed.
- Very intelligent and the best talkers in the parrot order.



Cons

- Can be loud, especially when bored.
- Can be destructive and demanding.

FERRET

Pros

- Engaging, playful and friendly.
- Easily trained.
- Small and quiet.



Cons

- Require a lot of attention.
- Tend to burrow and can get lost in your home. ‘Ferret-proofing’ is essential.

AXOLOTL

Pros

- Unique and nice to look at.
- Regenerative – if they ever lose a limb, they just grow it back.
- Easy to keep and cheap to feed.



Cons

- Need to make sure their environment is to the exact specifications – they need a medium sized tank with filtered water and not too much gravel.
- Not much personality.
- Can be cannibalistic so watch out for aggressive tendencies.

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“You know the size [a purebred animal] is going to become, you know its temperament, you know how hairy it's going to be and how much it's going to eat,” Dr Higgins says.

Puppy mills or puppy farms are not the things of gruesome fairytales; they do exist, and they represent both horrible lives for the animals kept to breed and questionable – at best – health standards of the puppies. Without visiting the actual breeder of a dog, you cannot know whether they are breeding loved and health-tested pets or caged animals.

Adopting a dog or cat from a shelter gives it a second chance at life. Many animals end up at shelters because their owners can no longer care for them, or they are lost, injured and abandoned. The RSPCA receives more than 150,000 animals every year and aims to rehabilitate and rehome each one.

On top of that enormous number are plenty of animals with other rescue organisations such as Monika's Rescue – one of Australia's earliest and best known no-kill shelters – Pet Rescue, Australian Working Dog Rescue, and a wide range of breed-specific rescue programs run by breeders and breed clubs.

This means that even prospective dog owners who want a purebred can find their perfect match and give a home to a grateful furry friend.

While breed-specific rescue organisations will be able to provide the pedigree details of some surrendered dogs, when it comes to adopting a pet from a shelter, you will usually not have all health records of the animal available to you. It is also possible that, even though your new pet may have undergone health and temperament checks, you will never know exactly what breed the animal is or whether it is at risk of genetic conditions.

If this is a risk you are willing to take, adopting an animal from a shelter is a win-win situation. You give the animal a much needed home, while the animal repays you with unconditional love and devoted affection. ••

FIND A SHELTER

RSPCA attempts to find homes for 150,000 animals each year.

W: www.rspcansw.org.au

Pet Rescue is Australia's largest online directory of rescue pets.

W: www.petrescue.com.au

Animal Aid provides incentives for older people adopting older pets.

W: www.animalaid.org.au

Monika's Rescue is Australia's best known no-kill shelter.

W: www.doggierescue.com.au

AWDRI rehomes working breeds – these dogs need active owners!

W: www.workingdogrescue.com.au

MEET THE MODELS



Birdie

Name: Birdie Oliver

Breed: Chihuahua

Age: about one year old

I'm from... Rooty Hill. A lovely lady picked me up when I was lost on the street. I was so hungry, so she fed me and found me a forever family.

Favourite pastimes: my walks! I forage in the grass and meet lots of people. A lot of homeless people are my friends and always give me a pat.

Today was... adventurous. I met a lot of Labradors – my favourite!



Honey

Name: Honey Bunny Colourful Sprinkles

Age: Three

Breed: Beagle

I'm from... I was born in a litter of five pups and have my pedigree papers. My owner April picked me out because I was her favourite, and I couldn't be happier.

Favourite pastimes: running from one end of the park to the other chasing my ball and following all the aromas of Sydney's inner west. If you need me any other time, I'll be asleep in front of the fire.

Today was... fun! I met another Beagle, and there were so many treats!



Charlie

Name: Charlie the Wonderdog

Age: Three or four, I think

Breed: I think I'm a little bit Border Collie, a little bit Golden Retriever.

I'm from... I busted out of a puppy farm about two years ago and Australian Working Dog Rescue found me a new family. I don't have to have any more puppies, I have my very own bed instead of a cage and I go to the park every day to play with lots of other dogs.

Favourite pastimes: swimming, chasing seagulls, Frisbee and fetch.

Today was... heaps of fun! I met new buddies and we played for hours.