

When Are You Too Old to Adopt a Pet?

Johanna, a 100-year-old California resident, recently adopted Gucci, an 11-year-old Chihuahua mix, proving age doesn't need to keep you from enjoying life and feeling loved by a furry best friend. When seniors adopt senior pets, it can be a win-win for both, as long as these conditions are met.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

Dec 28, 2022 • 6 min read

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- A few months ago, a 100-year-old dog lover in California was able to adopt an 11-year-old Chihuahua mix with the help of her daughter, her caregiver, a neighbor, and a wonderful senior dog rescue in San Francisco
- Thanks to the Seniors to Seniors program at Muttville Senior Dog Rescue, Johanna Carrington and her new furry best friend Gucci are living their best their lives together
- A survey of 2,000 adults aged 50 to 80 suggests that pets help people stay well as they age; survey respondents reported their pets helped them enjoy life, reduced stress, gave them a sense of purpose, and helped them stay physically active
- Drawbacks to pet ownership for seniors include difficulties traveling, financial strains, and the potential for falls and other injuries
- Even considering the drawbacks, it seems pet ownership may be especially beneficial for older adults — an age group for which social isolation and loneliness is commonplace

In a match most certainly made in heaven, in September Johanna Carrington, a 100-year-old Moss Beach, California resident, adopted Gucci, an 11-year-old Chihuahua mix.

"I just love him," Carrington told TODAY.¹

With No Dog Around, the House Was Too Quiet

Carrington has loved and lost many dogs over the years, after a childhood spent in a no-pets-allowed orphanage in war-torn Germany. At one point, she and her late husband were pet parents to eight Pekingese!

Having recently lost her dog, Rocky, Carrington's home was quiet — too quiet — and she wanted to fill the silence by adopting another dog. However, she and her daughter, Debbie, were concerned that a shelter might not allow someone of Carrington's advanced age to adopt a pet.

But as luck would have it, one of the ladies' Moss Beach neighbors was a volunteer for Muttville Senior Dog Rescue in San Francisco and was pretty sure the organization could help. Enter Gnocchi (renamed **Gucci**), a senior gentleman who had recently been rescued from a hoarding situation in which he was one of 22 dogs. The little guy seemed a perfect candidate for a one-dog home where he would receive the undivided love and attention he longed for.

Gucci Arrives and is Living His Best Life

So that the adoption could be approved, Carrington's caregiver, **Eddie Martinez**, agreed to take Gucci on daily walks and help with his care. In early September, Gucci's foster parent drove him to meet Carrington, and he quickly made himself right at home!

"He came to the house like he'd been here before. It was remarkable," Carrington said. "He saw me sitting on my chair, jumped up on me and sat on my lap. He made himself very, very comfortable. He was just our baby right away."

Carrington and her helpers have ensured that Gucci isn't lacking for **dog toys**, which he enjoys fetching. He also receives back massages from Carrington while they watch TV together, and when it's time for lights out, Gucci **burrows into the blankets** on her bed and settles in for the night.

Carrington believes her healthy lifestyle is the key to her long and happy life (she's never had a cigarette or even a sip of an alcoholic drink), along with spending time with pets.

"Animals bring so much happiness in our home," she said. "It's unbelievable."

Carrington plans to do something fun with Gucci to celebrate her 101st birthday this month.

Careful Matching of Senior Dogs to Senior Citizens

When seniors adopt senior pets, it can be a win-win for both, according to Alice Ensor, adoptions coordinator at Muttnville. The rescue offers a "Seniors for Seniors" program in which dogs adopted out to seniors can return to Muttnville in the event the owner is hospitalized or passes away. In addition, the organization stays in contact with adopters in case they need assistance, such as a temporary foster home.

"We want them to still have that time together and experience the full joy of their senior years together," Ensor told TODAY. "I know as a dog lover, if I get to live that long, I hope that someone will adopt to me because I can't imagine my home without an animal in it. Life is better with a dog, whether you're young or old."

The Seniors for Seniors program accounts for about 32% of adoptions each year at **Muttnville**, which just celebrated its 15-year anniversary and 10,000th rescue. The staff works to find great matches for older adopters, such as small dogs who can be lifted, and dogs who are comfortable around walkers and wheelchairs. Gucci, for example, is a well-behaved little man, fully housetrained, and still active enough to handle the stairs in Carrington's house. In addition, since he no longer has teeth, Carrington doesn't have to budget for future dental care!

"After she lost her other dog, it was kind of sad here," Debbie Carrington told TODAY. "It was quiet and sad, and then Gucci brought joy into the house. Laughing about him running around and doing funny things, and then also him sleeping on her lap with her while she's in her recliner or sleeping in her bed, it's just making her very happy."

Ensor points out that the families, friends, neighbors, and caregivers of seniors wanting to adopt a pet can lend a hand by navigating technology during the adoption search. Many rescue organizations use social media to connect adoptable pets with people, and "Helping the prospective senior adopter handle the technology can be the first step,"

she said.

Survey: Pets Help Older Adults Enjoy Life and Feel Loved

Based on data from the 2019 National Poll on Healthy Aging sponsored by the University of Michigan's Institute for Healthcare Policy, people who hope to stay well as they age should consider adopting a pet.²

The survey polled about 2,000 U.S. adults aged 50 to 80, 55% of whom owned at least one pet.³ Dogs were the most common pet, followed by cats and smaller animals (e.g., hamsters and birds). Regardless of what type of pet was in the home, the vast majority of those surveyed reported that their animal companions improved their physical and mental health:

- 90% said their pets helped them enjoy life and feel loved
- 80% reported that their pets reduced stress
- 75% said their animal friends provided a sense of purpose
- 64% (including 78% of dog owners) said their pets encouraged them to stay physically active
- 60% said their animals helped them cope with physical and emotional health challenges

Potential Drawbacks

Some survey-takers reported a few downsides to pet ownership:

- 54% reported the difficulties of traveling or even leaving the house
- 18% mentioned financial strains
- 6% had a fall or other injury involving their pet
- 15% (including 26% of people in either fair or poor health) said their pet's health was more important than their own

Pets age much faster than we do, so it's important to be realistic about the demands of caring for an animal companion as both you and he age. For example, as your dog gets older, he may have trouble seeing or hearing, or require help going up and down stairs.

If you're having your own challenges with balance, frailty or are fearful of falling, it may be difficult to physically care for a dog (particularly a larger dog) who is having mobility issues.

Caring for an aging animal can take an emotional toll as well. In a survey of 600 pet owners, there was greater burden, stress and symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as poorer quality of life, in owners of pets with chronic or terminal disease.⁴

However, this was true regardless of the person's age, and while it's difficult to face end-of-life issues with your pet, most people agree it's a sacrifice they'll gladly make in exchange for the years of happiness their animal companion offers them.

It's also important to put a plan in place to provide care for your pet in the event you become unable to.

Even given the drawbacks, the National Poll on Healthy Aging results suggest that being a pet parent may be especially important for older adults — an age group coping with an unprecedented level of social isolation and loneliness.

Adoption and Other Options

If you're an older adult, as long as your health, finances and living situation allow it, the benefits of pet ownership tend to far outweigh the drawbacks. It's worth noting that some senior centers and retirement communities are also acknowledging this and allow residents to move in with pets.

Many animal shelters also allow seniors to adopt pets at a reduced cost, and like Muttville, some also have "seniors for seniors" programs that specialize in matching older animals with older humans. Another such program exists at **Helping Paws Animal Shelter** in Woodstock, Illinois:

"Our Senior to Senior adoption program is all about senior citizens rediscovering the joys of having a cat or dog in their lives. The program helps place senior cats and dogs, who are 7 years of age and older, with senior citizens who are 65 years of age or older. The adoption fee is waived for any approved senior citizen adopting a senior pet."⁵

If you'd love to have a pet in your life but feel the commitment of pet ownership may be overwhelming, you might want to consider alternatives such as fostering an animal, volunteering to walk a neighbor's dog, or helping out at an animal shelter.

If you love animals, spending time in their presence, even temporarily, is likely to offer many of the same benefits of pet ownership without as much responsibility — and this is something you can take advantage of at any age.

Sources and References

¹ [TODAY.com, September 21, 2022](#)

² [Time, April 3, 2019](#)

³ [Healthy Aging Poll](#)

⁴ [Spitznagel, MB et al. Veterinary Record, Volume 181, Issue 12, September 2017, Pages 321-321](#)

⁵ [Helping Paws Animal Shelter, Senior to Senior](#)
