

## Do You Have Too Many Pets?

Researchers have found a dark side to owning multiple animals. Discover the hidden health risks your beloved pets might be facing.

### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Animal hoarding may be a special manifestation of hoarding disorder; simply put, animal hoarders accumulate more animals than they can care for, with the result that the animals suffer both physical and emotional neglect
- A recent study suggests that having 8 or more pets is associated with animals having worse health
- One clear sign of animal hoarding — the person is unable to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter and veterinary care for the animals
- Other warning signs include a strong odor and evidence of dried feces, urine, vomit, etc. on the floor, as well as the presence of emaciated, lethargic and under-socialized animals
- It's not uncommon for initially well-intentioned animal rescues to morph into hoarding situations; when a rescue group routinely and consistently exceeds its resources with too many animals, it crosses the line from rescuing to hoarding

**Animal hoarding** is a situation in which a person accumulates more animals than he or she can care for. The animals suffer both physical and emotional neglect, as even their basic needs — adequate nutrition, sanitation, shelter and veterinary care — are not met.

Recently, researchers at Mississippi State University set out to determine patterns of pet ownership in a rural setting, and the link between the number of animals in a household and indicators of animal health. The team reviewed veterinary records from 2009 to 2019 on file at the community clinic at MSU's College of Veterinary Medicine.

The researchers found that most animals were from either single-animal households (47%) or households with 2 to 3 animals (36%). Just over 2% of animals lived in a household with 8 or more animals. The researchers found that having 8 or more pets was associated with animals having worse health. They published their findings in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Association*.<sup>1</sup>

### Animal Hoarding Is a Complex Mental Health Issue

According to the ASPCA, the primary characteristic of hoarding disorder is defined as "persistent difficulties discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of their actual value."<sup>2</sup> Further:

*"The DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition) definition of hoarding disorder specifically addresses animal hoarding, while suggesting that it may be a special manifestation of the disorder.*

*Animal hoarding is usually accompanied by a history of disordered or inadequate attachments to people. Most hoarders have psychological and social histories beginning in childhood that are chaotic and traumatic. Many people who exhibit hoarding behavior reportedly grew up in households with inconsistent parenting, in which animals may have been the only stable feature. Some people who hazardously accumulate animals began collecting after a traumatic event or loss, while others see themselves as 'rescuers' who save animals from lives on the street. In addition to these influences, biological factors, including genetics, neurophysiology, and infectious disease, have been suggested as possible explanations for this disorder."*<sup>3</sup>

## **Signs of Animal Hoarding**

Having multiple animals doesn't automatically mean the person is a hoarder. Signs of an unmanageable situation include:<sup>4</sup>

- The person owns an unusual number of animals and may not know the total number.
- He or she is unable to provide minimal standards of nutrition, sanitation, shelter and veterinary care for the animals.
- The home or property has deteriorated (i.e., dirty windows, broken furniture, holes in the wall and floor, extreme clutter).
- There's a strong odor, and evidence of dried feces, urine, vomit, etc. on the floor.
- Some, most or all the animals are emaciated, lethargic and under-socialized.
- Fleas and vermin are present.
- The person may be isolated from social support and may neglect themselves or appear physically or mentally unwell.
- He or she may be open to receiving assistance to rectify the situation; alternatively, the person may not have awareness of the severity of the situation or refuse help.

## **Animal Rescue or Animal Hoarder?**

While most rescue organizations do an admirable job of housing, rehabilitating, and rehoming pets, often with very limited funds, there are many that aren't well-managed, and some that are actually the opposite of rescues.

*"Animal rescues that morph into hoarders are one of the fastest growing types of animal abuse seen," writes veterinarian Jennifer Woolf in a 2019 article for VetzInsight. "It is unknown exactly how many animals are affected by hoarding, though the FBI now includes it and other forms of neglect in the data they collect on animal abuse. However, it is estimated that 250,000 animals are victims of hoarding each year. Because many animals may be in these situations for months, years, or sometimes their whole lives, the extent of suffering endured is tremendous. More animals experience cruelty due to neglect than from overt actions like beatings."*<sup>5</sup>

Many if not most animal rescues start with good intentions, often led by one or a few people whose goal is to provide shelter, food, water, and veterinary care for homeless animals. However, if the leader(s) of the effort cannot find the balance between the number of animals in their care and available resources, they go beyond the point of their "capacity for care," defined as their ability to meet the needs of every animal they take in, regardless of how or when they came in, their age, health status, and personality.

When a rescue group routinely and consistently exceeds its resources with too many animals, it crosses the line from rescuing to hoarding. Some telltale signs that a “rescue group” is actually a hoarding operation include:

- The leader(s) are unwilling to let visitors see where the animals are kept
- They don't reveal how many animals they're caring for
- They make minimal to no effort to rehome the animals
- They continue to take in animals even when the existing animals aren't receiving adequate care

## **Do You Know an Animal Hoarder?**

If you think you know someone who is an animal hoarder, the first step in helping the animals is to make a call to your local humane society, police department, animal welfare organization or even a local veterinarian. They may be able to send someone out to assess the situation and, if not, may direct you to the appropriate agency that can help.

You might also want to consider contacting social service groups, such as a mental health agency, health department or adult protective services, especially if the animal hoarder is suffering from additional mental health issues or is elderly and otherwise socially isolated.

## **Sources and References**

[HealthDay, May 18, 2023](#)

<sup>1</sup> [Dozier, M.E. et al. Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 01 Jul 2023, Volume 261: Issue 7](#)

<sup>2,3,4</sup> [ASPCA, Animal Hoarding](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Jennifer Woolf, DVM, MS. VIN.com, VetInsight, July 15, 2019](#)

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