

Why dogs really are a person's best friend

August 27 2019, by Ciara O'shea



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Researchers from The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) at Trinity College have highlighted the positive links between dog ownership and higher levels of physical activity in middle-aged and older adults.

The report launched by TILDA shows that dog owners who walk their dog at least three times per week also report higher levels of active and social leisure activities and close social relationships than those who walk their dogs less frequently. The authors highlight that the reason for having a pet is an important factor in explaining whether a dog owner benefits from better [mental health](#) and wellbeing. The report is published [here](#).

Key findings

- Almost half (45 percent) of adults aged 50 years and over in Ireland own a pet with dogs being most common (38 percent) followed by cats (21 percent).
- Dog ownership is highest in adults aged 50-64 years (51 percent compared to 25 percent in adults aged 75 and over) and is higher in rural dwellers compared to those in Dublin (49 percent versus 26 percent).
- Three out of four adults (78 percent) walk their dog at least three times per week while two-fifths (38 percent) walk their dog every day.
- Dog owners are more likely to report high levels of physical activity, to achieve the recommended 150 minutes walking per week, and to have higher grip strength (a marker of muscle strength and frailty), compared to non-pet owners and those who own other pets.
- Dog ownership is not only associated with positive health behaviors however, as female dog owners are more likely to report being current smokers, although those who walk their dogs at least three times per week have lower body mass index compared to those who walk their dogs less frequently.
- Dog owners who walk their dog at least three times per week are more likely to report active and social leisure activities in the past month (92 percent versus 86 percent) and to have close social

relationships (44 percent versus 27 percent) than dog owners who walk their dog less frequently.

- Pet owners who report that their reason for having a pet is because they love animals have a higher sense of purpose in life, whereas those who have a pet to keep busy or to have something to take care of have lower wellbeing scores.

Lead author Dr. Orna Donoghue said: "The importance of physical activity and continued [social engagement](#) and social participation as we age is well established—both are associated with improved health and wellbeing and lower mortality. Dog owners report higher levels of physical activity compared to non-dog owners. However, regular dog walking appears to be an important mechanism through which dog owners attain higher levels of active social participation and more close social relationships. Given the high prevalence of [dog ownership](#), the strong bond and attachment between dogs and their owners and the physical activity requirements to promote dog health, dog walking may represent a useful strategy to improve physical, social and mental health outcomes in older [dog owners](#)."

Principal Investigator of TILDA, Professor Rose Anne Kenny said: "Pets are hugely important for many people, however as people get older, their circumstances may change and it is not always possible to keep a pet. To maintain wellbeing in [older adults](#) and to support independent aging at home, it will be important to consider the potential benefits of exposure to and interaction with pets and consequently, innovative ways which facilitate older adults to keep pets for as long as they wish to do so. This is especially pertinent given the current changing population demographics in Ireland; with increased [life expectancy](#), we should address initiatives that increase opportunities for active and healthy aging. In addition to our work in TILDA, there is emerging data on the benefits of [dogs](#) in hospitals and patient settings—particularly rehabilitation units and dementia units."

More information: Read the full report here:
tilda.tcd.ie/publications/repo ... ort_PetOwnership.pdf

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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