

## Good bones

Did you know that half of women, and 25 percent of men, will break at least one bone after age 50? These midlife broken bones are often the result of osteoporosis. But this condition is not an inevitable byproduct of aging, as was once thought.

Writing in *Healthy Living Made Simple*, Andrea Singer, clinical director for the National Osteoporosis Foundation and a national expert on bone-loss issues, explains that “we can hold onto strong bones with the right combination of nutrition, exercise, healthy habits, fall prevention and medication when needed.” She calls this “a whole-person bone-health action plan.”

The whole-person approach includes a calcium-rich diet (plus vitamin D supplements, if needed), regular exercise, fall-proofing your home, avoiding too much alcohol and smoking cessation. Medication may also be needed if you have experienced breaks or bone loss.

Singer urges seniors to watch for red flags, like a broken wrist caused by a fall. “Normal bone doesn’t break when you fall at standing height,” she writes. “A break caused by a fall from a standing height, no matter how ‘hard’ the surface or how ‘bad’ the fall, is considered low-trauma and is almost always due to weak, brittle bones: osteoporosis.”

If something like that happens, ask your health-care provider about a bone-density test, Singer says. “Together, you can assess your risk for more fractures and make decisions about the best ways to protect your bones in the years ahead.”



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Photo courtesy Pets for Seniors

## Seniors and pets

BY STEPHANIE BOUCHARD

After caring for his aging mother in his home for seven years, Army veteran Jim Hutcheson, 76, of West Peoria, Ill., felt the loss of companionship when she moved into an assisted living facility. So he adopted an 8-pound middle-aged Chihuahua he named Peanut.

“He’s got big eyes and long ears, and he just loves to snuggle,” Hutcheson says. “He usually lies on an afghan in the chair next to me, but then he’ll raise up, and he’ll look at me like, ‘Can I come over and sit with you?’ All I have to do is kind of nod and he jumps out of his chair and onto my lap.”

Research evidence varies that having a pet is good for seniors, but the prevailing wisdom is that animal companions benefit people of all ages.

Some studies suggest that having pets lowers cortisol, the “stress” hormone, and increases levels of serotonin, the “feel good” hormone. That in turn lowers one’s heart rate, blood pressure and stress levels, and diminishes depression and feelings of loneliness.

Pet owners also may reap the benefits of additional exercise and social interaction. For example, dog owners can take regular walks, visiting with other people along the way. Those with felines can toss balls to their cats.

Other studies indicate that having pets does not slow down age-related declines like reduced mobility, and the loss or illness of a well-loved pet can cause or deepen depression and loneliness and increase stress. Costs of veterinary care can also be a burden to those with limited incomes.

For Hutcheson and thousands of others, though, no evidence is needed to tell them what they know from their own experience: the benefits of having pets can’t be quantified. “It’s just nice to have somebody to come home to,” he says.

While Hutcheson recommends welcoming a pet into your life, he and animal experts say that adopting a pet shouldn’t be taken lightly.

The National Council for Aging Care suggests that seniors consider their income, activity levels and health to determine what kind of pet is best. Make a pros-and-cons list. And ease your mind with a Plan B for what happens if you can’t care for your beloved pet in the short or long term. Visit [www.aginginplace.org/seniors-and-pets](http://www.aginginplace.org/seniors-and-pets) for more advice about adopting a pet.

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