

Robot Pets Make Good Companions for Seniors

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Journey to
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Like shelter and food, companionship is one of the most important necessities in life. Having someone to talk to or attend outings with can make for better, happier days. Sometimes, though, the best companion is a furry, feathered or scaly friend to cuddle and care for. While owning a pet or interacting with an animal may not be possible for everyone, older adults can still gain the benefits of pets through modern robotics.

What Is a Robot Pet?

Robot pets are toy animals with lifelike features meant to emulate real-life pets. These robots range from cuddly dogs to realistic companion cats, with various characteristics that make them similar to real-life animals.

Robot pets can serve different purposes. Some are meant for children to play with, others as companions for older adults.

Commercial pets are usually the most accessible and affordable and come in the form of robotic dogs, cats, and even birds. They're battery-operated, containing sensors all over their body that allow them to respond to human touch. They can also make realistic noises and have sound-and-movement combinations mirrored after real pets, like blinking eyes, wagging tails, wiggling ears, and more.

Robot pets are much more accessible and less like science fiction than you might think! Take a look at Hasbro's Joy for All Companion Pets, for example!



Hasbro's Joy for All Companion Pets



Can Robot Pets Provide Comfort?

Paro, another robot pet, is one of the most popular companion robots. Paro is a robotic baby harp seal with lush black eyelashes and a pacifier that doubles as its charger. Created by Japan's National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology (AIST), Paro is more than a stuffed animal. The little seal is packed with five kinds of sensors: touch, light, audio, temperature and posture. Plus, Paro can tailor its actions to the user. According to the Paro website, "If you stroke it every time you touch it, PARO will remember your previous action and try to repeat that action to be stroked."



Long before the pandemic, loneliness and social disconnection were acknowledged public health problems for older people, linked to measurably poorer mental and physical health. Now, their risk for serious illness from the coronavirus has denied many seniors the stimulation and comfort of personal visits, cultural events, volunteering, even grocery shopping. Isolation particularly threatens people with dementia, who are less able to embrace online diversions and communication.

"Covid has created a bizarre world where nobody can hug anybody," said Laurie Orlov, a veteran industry analyst and founder of the newsletter Aging and Health Technology Watch. "The idea of a pet you can hold — a tactile experience — transcends that somewhat." Researchers have reported benefits from interacting with PARO, although the studies were often small and short-term. At facilities in Texas and Kansas, for instance, investigators followed 61 residents with dementia who had 20-minute group sessions with a PARO three days a week for three months. Their stress and anxiety decreased, the researchers found, and they needed less medication for pain and problem behaviours.

Front Porch, a non-profit senior living provider, acquired several PAROs in 2015 and tracked their effects through about 900 surveys reporting residents' interactions. Over six months, the staff reported that the robots — which acquired names and, at holidays, festive outfits — helped calm residents, increased their social behaviour and improved mood and appetite.

Therefore, having a companion pet can do wonders for anyone's health.



In brief

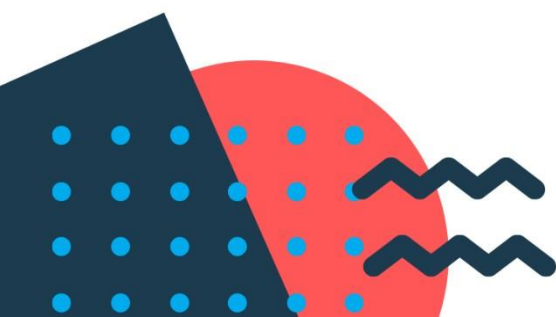
Seniors and Residents of nursing homes are more at risk of developing feelings of depression and isolation due to the lack of social interaction in their everyday lives. One way to combat feelings of loneliness is by having a companion pet by their side. Whether it's a real pet or a robotic pet may depend on each individual's situation, but both are shown to be helpful in improving the health and overall quality of living of seniors and elderly nursing home residents.

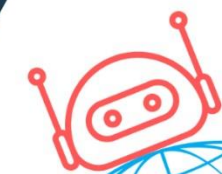
Petting an animal can decrease our brain's levels of cortisone – aka the stress hormone – and boost the release of the happy chemical serotonin. Along with this, the heart rate and blood pressure can also be decreased.

Robot Pets can also help combat mental health disorders, be it anxiety, depression, or PTSD. Robotic pet therapy, while still a relatively new method, has thus far proven to have similar benefits to that of traditional pet-assisted therapy.

The Future of Robot Pets

Robot pets are becoming a common fixture especially in assisted living communities and, as years go by, these robot pets will become more advanced at mimicking real animal behaviours. While some believe that robot pets can't compete with real animals, the companionship they provide to older adults cannot be denied.





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