

The Effects of Pets in Cancer Care: A Case Study

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Humans can form an intense bond with their pets through shared love, attachment, and amusement. Through this case study, nurses can develop an increased understanding of how companion pets affect the quality of life of patients with cancer. Oncology nurses may incorporate the awareness of this relationship between patients and their pets into patient care.

AT A GLANCE

- Oncology nurses can identify some elements of strong human–animal bonding.
- Human–animal bonding can lead to enhanced quality of life for patients with cancer.
- Oncology nurses can incorporate pet-related concerns into patient care.

KEYWORDS

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A cancer diagnosis can be a threat to a person's physical, psychological, and social well-being. Patients with cancer undergo ongoing physical examinations, diagnostic tests, and treatments. They encounter stressors that are not limited to the cancer diagnosis and include cancer-related symptoms, adverse effects from treatment, fear of the unknown or unfavorable prognosis, anxiety and depression from treatment outcomes, and social isolation. Therefore, a holistic approach for patients with cancer is essential to support patients to help with coping and healing.

Since 1961, researchers have identified correlations between positive interactions with domesticated animals and benefits to humans (McCune et al., 2014; Takashima & Day, 2014). When holistically treating patients with cancer, the nursing team can ask in the initial assessment whether the patient has pets and, if so, inquire about their relationship with those pets. When undergoing cancer treatment, patients may be anxious or concerned that they may be unable to care for their pets. By addressing concerns early on, the team may help them cope more effectively during treatment. In a 2010 study by Larson et al. surveying 309 patients with cancer to assess whether they had pet-related concerns and desired more pet care–related information or resources during chemotherapy, most pet owners described that their pets had helped them during the cancer continuum. Of the 170 patients with pets, 7% of pet owners desired more information on community resources for pet care, and 80% of pet owners had family members helping them with pet care (Larson et al., 2010). Through assessment conversations, oncology nurses may have a better understanding of how companion pets affect patients' quality of life. The human–animal relationship paints a beautiful portrait of unconditional love, attachment, bonding, and laughter between humans and companion pets.

Dogs are the most popular pet in the United States, with an estimated 65.1 million households owning at least one dog according to a 2023–2024 pet owners survey. Cats and freshwater fish ranked in second place and third place, with around 46.5 million and 11.1 million households owning these pets, respectively (Shahbandeh, 2024). Birds ranked in fourth place, with 5.7 million households owning companion birds (Shahbandeh, 2024). Although there are significantly fewer bird owners than dog owners, human–bird relationships are as supportive as owning a companion dog, which is demonstrated by the following case study of D.J. (whose name has been changed) and his two doves.

Case Study

D.J. was diagnosed with multiple myeloma in June 2022. He underwent induction chemotherapy and then autologous hematopoietic stem cell