

Guide to Companion Pets in Residential Aged Care Home (RACH)

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- **Australian Companion Animals Network**
- **The Australian Veterinarians in Public Health (AVPH) Special Interest Group**
- **Australian Veterinarian Association Policy and Advocacy Team**
- **Samantha Jewell CEO Life View – Aged Care Provider**

Introduction

Residential and visiting animals are widely known to enhance the quality of life for older persons in care. A person (and animal) - centred approach is taken when enabling the continuation of residing companionship between an older person and pet when moving into residential care.

Governance

The Aged Care Draft Bill 2024 addresses the rights of older persons to remain connected to their pets where the individual chooses. The current Aged Care Quality Standards and planned Strengthened Aged Care Quality Standards address the requirement for Person Centred Care and consideration to older persons choice and mental well-being.

Purpose

The aim of this document is to provide guidance to support older people, animals, and care providers to enable co-residence of older persons and their pets. The following guide will address dogs and cats as companion pets to the older person. The expectation is that the older person is responsible for the pets' costs and can undertake its care with assistance from a guarantor and support from the care provider.

While pets can benefit older people, health care workers (HCW) and visitors by providing comfort, therapeutic care, sense of wellbeing and entertainment, it's important to be aware of risks associated with pets in the health care environment, including injury, allergy and infection and understand how to minimise them. Most risks can be managed.

Note: Most older persons in Residential Aged Care Home (RACH) are immunocompromised, this heightens risk of acquiring zoonoses (infections from animals) if risk management strategies are not put into place.

It is acknowledged that co-residence may not be possible in all circumstances and ways for ongoing contact (e.g. visits, photographs) with the pet and older person should be discussed and established if possible.

Terms of Reference

Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)	Australia's peak professional association of the veterinary profession, representing like-minded professionals across the country and providing continuing professional development and resources.
Guarantor	An individual who promises to manage or pay for a situation if the owner is unable or defaults.
Health Care worker (HCW)	A HCW is defined as an individual engaged in activities aimed at enhancing health. It is anyone who works in a healthcare centre.
Older Person	A person over 65 years of age and residing in a residential aged care home or in the home care setting receiving assistance.
Companion pet (pet)	A domesticated or domestic-bred animals in close daily relationship with humans - physical, emotional, behavioral and social needs are met by both human and animal through the loving relationship.
Residential Aged Care Home (RACH)	A residence for older persons who can no longer live in their own home. It includes accommodation and personal care 24 hours a day, as well as access to nursing and general health care services.
Veterinary Behaviour Group (VBG)	Collaboration that aims to improve animal welfare by increasing the understanding of animal behaviour and its significance in veterinary science.

Consent

Approval for animals in healthcare should be made between aged care providers, HCW, older persons and guarantor.

Pet pre-admission considerations

- The pet is a cat or dog accepted by the RACH post discussions with veterinarian.
- The pet has a guarantor, who alongside the older person will hold responsibility for the pet.
- The pet has a veterinarian with established relationship and care contract.
- The pet is at least 1-2 yrs of age.
- The pet is spayed or neutered.
- The pet has been in a home environment for the previous 6 months prior to entering the RACH – not from an animal shelter or other facility.
- The pet is assessed (by the veterinarian, older person and provider) to tolerate the environment and the restrictions within the RACH.
- Restrictions include residing in the older persons room, allocated area for the pet to roam, established entry and exit points to the RACH, designated areas where the pet cannot go (i.e. food storage, food preparation, cooking or serving areas), management of pet in RACH via leash/harness or carry box is established.
- The pet is well behaved and can be controlled, a household pet.
- The pet is assessed (by veterinarian) as physically healthy and any additional care needs for the pet are considered manageable, in consultation with their veterinarian.
- The pet is assessed (by veterinarian) to be free of fleas, ticks, other ectoparasites and mange.
- Veterinary contract and medication arrangements are established.
- The pet is assessed (by veterinarian with animal behaviour expertise/credentials) to have appropriate behaviour and temperament to reside in a RACH i.e. reactions to strangers, loud noises, groups of people and human contact.
- Designated training by appropriately qualified and experienced service providers should be provided to older persons and HCW. Current information on zoonoses, infection control practices, recognising parasitic infection and reading an animal's body language for signs of stress, fear, aggression are recommended.
- Feeding arrangements.

- Grooming arrangements.
- Cleaning/disposal of excrement arrangements.
- Equipment – purchase and cleaning responsibilities.

Pet pre-admission considerations for the RACH

- The older person is assessed to be able to physically and mentally (physiotherapist and GP) manage the pet.
- The RACH can accommodate an outdoor area and requirements for the animal.
- Review of any older person with allergies or objections to the pet is undertaken.
- Review of any HCW with allergies or who are pregnant – can staffing be managed/accommodate?
- Consideration for any assistance expected of carers – if so what and is this achievable?
- Additional fee supplement agreement is made.

Pet Care

- Pets are treated with respect and consideration. This reduces risk of injury and disease through accidental scratching or biting. A calm, quiet environment is well suited to animals.
- The environment protects the pet from the elements, is clean and hygienic, free from disease, ventilated, has space move around, stretch and rest.
- Minimise overcrowding that may cause stress to the pet – i.e. older people all suddenly gathering around.
- People attending pets should be trained in correct animal handling techniques to avoid injury to the pet, older person and other people.
- Pets are screened by veterinarian prior to RACH admission and two-four weeks after admission – consideration to behaviour, physical wellbeing - including grooming, vaccination, worm, flea, tick and other ectoparasites management.
- Dogs in particular, require a 'settled in' period in a new environment. This allows normal behaviour to be expressed but it may also allow negative behaviours to arise as well as positive – e.g. possessiveness of things, protective behaviour towards a person or persons.
- Ongoing monitoring of pet behaviour and suitability is required by veterinarian with animal behaviour expertise/credentials, given the nature of potential change in owner-pet

relationships, particularly in situations with the potential for declining physical and/or mental health status of the owner.

- There should be a protocol for reporting behavioural or health concerns in place. The Australian Veterinarian Association (AVA) Veterinary Behaviour Group may be able to assist with this: <https://www.ava.com.au/about-us/ava-groups/animal-behaviourists/>
- Annual pet examinations are required at a minimum by a veterinary practitioner.
- Pets are vaccinated by the veterinary in accordance with species requirement, they must remain up to date.
- Pets are regularly wormed by older person and/or guarantor according to species requirement.
- Pet fleas, ticks, and other ectoparasites treatments are scheduled and administered by older person and/or guarantor, and a pest/rodent program is in place for the RACH environment – specific attention to pet residing rooms.
- Older person and/or guarantor ensure records of all vaccinations, treatments and veterinary visits are attended and provided to the RACH.
- Veterinary advice is sought immediately if animal is unwell or distressed and kept isolated away from other people and animals.
- People (staff, visitors, service providers) who are unwell (respiratory, gastroenteritis, other) should not be within the home.

Exercise and Enrichment

- Dogs and cats need regularly exercise for enrichment and wellbeing.
- Consideration to home common spaces for dogs or potentially a small, fenced-off leash area
- Dogs:
 - Dog walking services should be considered for this, in addition the guarantor may provide assistance. Use of “dog park” like space, where dogs can freely run is recommended
- Cats:
 - Cats should have access to roam outside, a means to exit and enter the older persons room should be established.

Grooming

- Grooming is the responsibility of the older person and/or guarantor.
- Pets are groomed regularly, including coat cutting/washing and regular outdoor brushing. The pet can be taken offsite to a pet grooming saloon or be attended by a mobile grooming service.
- Pet claws/nails are regularly reviewed and scheduled appointments for clipping with veterinary or animal grooming services are in place.

Food and feeding

- Human food and beverages are consumed away from pets – pets are not to be in dining areas or near kitchens/serveries.
- Hygienic practices must always be undertaken – i.e. environment cleaning/disinfection, cleaning of pet bowl/plate, hand hygiene.
- Hand hygiene stations (and laminated signage) are in/near home dining and communal areas for HCW, older persons and visitors.
- Fresh drinking water is always available for the pet and over seen by the older person and /or guarantor.
- Pet feeding areas are designated, clean and pest free within the older persons room or dedicated enclosed outdoor pet area. Pets cannot be fed in any other location in the RACH.
- Pet food is stored in designated area – not in older persons' fridge or near other human consumption items or utensils.
- Pet feeding is the responsibility of the older person and/or guarantor. Only commercial pet food is given. No raw meat or dehydrated chews or treats of animal origin are given.
- Moist pet food is single serve and opened pet food not used is discarded immediately. Moist meals not eaten within 4hrs are discarded. Left over or discarded animal feed is disposed in general waste.
- Feeding dishes/bowls are washed after every feed. Water bowls are washed daily. Cleaning cannot be attended at hand washing sinks or where food is prepared for human consumption – an alternate area and sink (with cleaning equipment and detergent) must be allocated.
- Dried food is stored in its original packaging in a sealed labelled plastic container. Storage is not near human food storage or preparation areas. The container is cleaned regularly and used only for this purpose.

- People cannot come between a pet and its food. A pet is not to be touched while eating.
- Hand hygiene is performed before and after handling pet food, feeding animals and cleaning bowls/plates and utensils.

Waste and litter

- Litter trays are not kept near food storage or animal feeding area. Litter trays are placed in older persons' room or in designated enclosed outdoor area.
- Litter trays are lined for easy cleaning and litter disposal. Cages, carry containers should be lined for easy cleaning.
- PPE (gloves and aprons) are worn when cleaning, emptying litter trays, managing cages/carry containers, or handling animal faeces or urine. When task is complete dispose of gloves and apron in general waste and attend hand hygiene.
- Litter tray or enclosed litter boxes are attended at least daily (more if required) for the removal of urine and faeces. Pets are often habitual with waste and management time can be around the pet's routine.
- Litter trays and boxes are cleaned and disinfected weekly (or as required if visibly soiled) with clean litter change.
- Care is taken with animal waste (urine, faeces, vomit). A scoop and disposable waste bag are used to collect/remove matter. Bagged waste is disposed in an external (labelled) general waste bin.
- Note: Pregnant women (due to risk of toxoplasmosis) or those with specific pet allergies, do not undertake any of the above tasks. Staff allocation is managed.

Staff and visitor care

- All HCW and visitors are made aware of pets onsite – older person admission and staff orientation booklets, newsletters, signage (entrance and older persons room door).
- RACH provide HCW with general education / training on animal care, feeding, animal veterinary and health requirements, waste management, cleaning/disinfection of environment -including pest control and equipment, standard precautions such as hand hygiene, PPE.

- Skin lesions/cuts on HCW, visitors and older persons are covered with a waterproof dressing before any interaction with the pet.
- Food, treatments or care outside of the pet care plan is not provided. Where changes are required a re-assessment via veterinary and RACH is undertaken, and care plan amended.
- If a person comes into direct contact or indirect (i.e. on equipment/bedding) with animal faeces, urine, vomit or saliva, remove soiled clothing as soon as practical and wash the area of body/hands with soap and water. Soiled items are washed or discarded.
- If a person's eye is scratched or contaminated with faeces, urine, vomit or saliva, they eye is wash with large amounts of water or eye wash solution. Seek medical assistance as required.
- Some people are allergic to animals or their products (i.e. saliva, sweat, fur, urine) and exposure can trigger an allergic reaction or asthma. RACH identify staff with allergies and inform HCW of pet residing locations in the RACH. HCW with allergies to pets are allocated to alternate older persons without pets in their care.
- Pregnant women are informed of risks and allocated alternate older persons without pets in their care.
- HCW should ensure they are up to date with routine recommended vaccines, especially tetanus.
- RACH have a first aid kit in the event of injury or illness to older person, HCW, animal or visitors. Veterinary advice for additional items to a general first aid kit can be sort. Referral to medical assistance as required.

Assistance dogs

- Assistance dogs are working animals and not pets, and they must be treated accordingly.
- Animal care plans ensure no discrimination against people with disabilities. The Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth) prevents a person refusing a person entry to premises because the person has an assistance animal.
- When on duty the dog should not be petted or distracted. The dog owner is always asked whether the dog can be spoken to or touched, and response respected.
- The Delta Therapy Dogs: <https://www.deltasociety.com.au/> or Assistance Dogs Australia: <https://www.assistedogs.org.au/> may be able to assist.

General precautions

- Pets are discouraged from licking older persons, HCW or visitors.
- Hand hygiene (wash with liquid soap and water or alcohol gel) is performed before and after contact with a pet or pet items or preparing or eating food, drinking or any other hand to mouth activities. Washed hands are dried with disposable paper towel and where gel is used the hands are rubbed completely dry. Older persons are assisted where required. Signage (laminated) is available at the point of hand hygiene to instruct in the correct steps to wash or gel.

Cleaning schedules and processes are the responsibility of the older person and/or guarantor and are established for:

- Eating and drinking items: plates/bowls and utensils - a wash area (not older persons bathroom, hand washing sinks or in main kitchen or kitchenettes) is designated and includes running water, detergent and paper towels and general waste bin. Matting/lining under plates/bowls and surrounding the feeding area is cleaned with detergent and disinfectant wipes or solutions and single use cloths.
- Animal bedding or clothing: items are regularly checked for cleanliness and external parasite infestation. Monthly machine wash (separate) with detergent and hot water or ozone is attended – items can be taken offsite to laundromat, domestic machine or place in dissolvable washbag for laundering at RACH.
- Animal carry boxes are regularly checked for cleanliness and external parasite infestation. Monthly machine wash for all container bedding.
- Faeces and urine: litter trays, allocated synthetic grass, and external toileting areas – follow information above.
- Environmental controls: vermin/pest control, environment cleaning/disinfection of older person room and where animal is taken - routine (frequency consideration to fur/hair), high touch points and spill management.
- External parasite infestation: The parasite is identified by the veterinarian and appropriate management advised. Management will involve treatment of the pet and their bedding/environment with a suitable veterinary approved product. Environment control

measures may require assistance from licensed pest control operator – who must be informed of animals onsite.

- Note: All animal equipment, feeding and toileting items etc should be washed separate to older persons' items.

Bites and scratches

- Pet claws/nails are clipped to reduce scratches.
- Persons are to avoid placing hands near pets' mouth, especially while eating.
- If a bite or scratch occurs it is to be washed with liquid soap and running warm water, dried with paper towel and covered with a waterproof dressing. Review by Registered Nurse. Incident reporting (including documentation) should occur immediately as per aged care provider processes.
- Medical assistance should always be sought for any penetrating skin wound inflicted by a cat/dog bite or scratch, with consideration for antibiotics. Animal bites can sometimes cause serious infection, particularly in immunosuppressed persons.
- The AVA recommends the following article on the management of animal bites:
<https://www.racgp.org.au/getattachment/6d326a0b-e2a4-433d-b691-b814e9617ccd/Mammalian-bites.aspx>
- Post an animal bite/scratch re-assessment of the pets' physical wellbeing, behaviour and temperament is required by veterinarian and RACH.

Deceased Animals

- The older person and/or guarantor is responsible for removal of the pet body.
- Arrangements established with veterinarian for provision of advice and the correct course of action at the time of passing.
- The RACH has access to bereavement support teams. The RACH arranges onsite bereavement response encompassing the owner, other older persons, guarantor and HCW (as needed) through counselling services.
- The emerging field of Veterinary Social Work (VSW) in Australia will soon be able to provide additional resources to RACH s in this area.

Additional Resource Guide

AVA Companion animals in aged-care accommodation: <https://www.ava.com.au/policy-advocacy/policies/companion-animals-management-and-welfare/companion-animals-in-aged-care-accommodation/>

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Version

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1.0	Dec 2024	New	ACIPC IPC Consultant, Carrie Spinks	ACAN, AVA, PGC
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