



# Risk Management Considerations for Therapy Animals

**T**herapy dogs (and other animals) are used for the physical and emotional benefit of people in hospitals, seniors' residences, nursing homes, day care centres, special needs schools, psychiatric hospitals and many other places where people may be restricted from having pets. The medical profession has widely acknowledged that petting animals can have a calming effect, lower blood pressure, and relieve tension.

In order to be a therapy dog, your organization should evaluate the animal to determine its suitability.

- Evaluation looks at reactions to sudden noises, other animals, wheelchairs, elevators as well as its basic training and temperament.
- If the dog passes evaluation, it should be slowly introduced to those in your organization.
- Visits are eagerly anticipated by clients, therefore volunteers must commit to regular scheduled visits.

Dogs, cats, horses, rabbits, guinea pigs and ferrets are all acceptable therapy animals provided they pass their evaluation and have good temperaments. Amphibians and reptiles such as iguanas are not generally considered because their skin can carry salmonella bacteria.

## Guidelines

1. Volunteers should wear approved apparel when visiting your organization (name badge identifying them as a visitor with a therapy dog/animal).

2. Volunteers agree to abide by your organization's vaccination and health requirements for the animal and will submit proof annually.
3. Volunteers agree that their animal will accompany them on a therapy visit only in a well-groomed, clean and healthy state.
4. Volunteers agree that on pet therapy visits, their pet will always be on leash, and the leash will always be in the hands of the pet's approved handler; one pet only per handler on visits.
5. Volunteers agree that when any noticeable change in the animal's temperament or if physical limitations are evident they will immediately retire the animal from the program or participate in another evaluation.

## Train Staff Before Introducing Therapy Animals

- Have a staff training session
- Cover topics such as definitions, terminology, policies and procedures, and expectations of staff
- Potential Risks
- Allergies
- Infectious disease spreading
- Phobias
- Bites and scratches

## Allergies

It is essential to find out in advance if any residents have an allergy to animals or are afraid of animals. It is recommended to have a sign at the entry of the building announcing the presence of therapy animals on-site or let the residents know when the volunteers/animals will be visiting. Ask residents if they just want to visit with the animal or if they want to pet it.

## Infectious Disease

- Visitation of patients and under contact precautions\ Physicians/Staff petting dog then immediately touching patients
- Touching animals while eating
- Feeding dog a treat by mouth
- Dogs drinking from toilets

## Animal Health Screening

- Rabies vaccination
- Annual veterinary examination
- No deworming recommendations
- No specific pathogen screening
- Diet
- No raw food or treats

## Visitation Procedures

- Hand hygiene
- Proper contacts
- Only on beds with impermeable, disposable barrier
- No contact with invasive devices, wounds, bandages
- No visitation of patients under enhanced precautions
- No visitation when patient is eating
- Explicit patient (and roommate) permission before entering room
- Restrict to 1 hour (dog fatigue)

The therapy animal should not be allowed to enter the following areas:

- ICU
- Food preparation areas
- Medication preparation areas
- Isolation

- Neonatal nurseries
- Potentially frightening areas

## Hand Hygiene

- Patients: Before and after animal contact
- Handlers: Between rooms
- Handlers should carry hand sanitizer

## Owners should reduce the risk of infection by following some basic guidelines:

1. Screen animals and avoid letting them come into contact with infected animals that are showing signs of illness, such as scratching, wheezing or agitation.
2. Treat animals for fleas.
3. Wash your hands frequently after petting and keep your animal away from food preparation areas.
4. Vaccinate your animal on the schedule recommended by your veterinarian; include stool checks in the annual exam.
5. Promptly clean up after your animal.
6. Treat any infections promptly.
7. Prevent your pet from eating raw meat or rodents.
8. Quarantine sick animals.
9. Clean scratches or bites thoroughly and promptly.
10. Use disposable gloves when cleaning a litter box or bird cage.

If the patient or agent requests that an animal be placed on the bed handler must:

1. Check for visible soiling of bed linens first.
2. Place a disposable, impermeable barrier between the animal and the bed; throw the barrier away after each patient.
3. If a disposable barrier is not available, a pillowcase, towel, or extra bed sheet can be used. Place such an item in the laundry immediately after use and never use it for multiple patients.

Be sure to enter into a contract with therapy pet owners. Ensure that they have the proper insurance coverage and that they are part of a recognized therapy animal program.