
THE ORTHOPAEDIC FORUM

What's Important: Postoperative Care Planning. Recognizing the Central Role of Pets in Many Patients' Lives

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America has a love affair with pets, and the nation is not alone. Dogs, cats, and an assorted variety of animals have become sources of companionship and loving interaction for vast numbers of people around the world, no more so than now in this time of a pandemic when many are isolated and alone and looking for companionship. Dogs and cats in particular have found a place in homes in the U.S., with 38% of households owning a dog¹. We love our pets; we feed and care for them and walk them (or they walk us). We shower our love, attention, and hard-earned money on them to a degree that may be startling to non-pet owners, who may look at us with a perplexed mix of confusion and sympathy, shaking their heads at the occasional (or not so occasional) excesses of this love.

So, what does pet ownership have to do with orthopaedics? Certainly, service animals have long had an important role in the lives of many individuals with disabilities. Therapy pets are also increasingly seen in hospitals and rehabilitation facilities because of their ability to provide psychological and emotional support and comfort, essential elements for successful rehabilitation and care. But it was in the course of research that we began to reflect more specifically on the question of pet ownership as we studied outcomes that patients desire from orthopaedic surgery and factors in their lives that they identify as important to their aftercare planning. It was a phased research project, first interviewing 65 patients who had or were about to have hip, knee, or spine surgery², and then surveying a larger group of patients who had or were about to have hip or knee replacement surgery.

In the first phase, which involved telephone interviews, we asked patients about symptoms or problems that led to their decision to undergo surgery. To our surprise, some patients talked about their companion animals, making comments such as, "We have a dog that we like to walk, and I had to give that up, so I would say it did affect my life" or, "I like to walk [and] take my dogs." When we asked about their desired outcomes of surgery, including how they see success postoperatively, a number of patients offered comments such as, "I can walk my dogs," "I can go for a walk with my husband and dog in the morning," "[I can] take my dogs out for a 5-mile walk," and "I don't walk the dog very long, but I can walk her a little bit." Finally, we asked patients about factors in their lives that they perceived as being important to aftercare and recovery from surgery. Again, some patients talked about their pet's welfare as being an important factor in planning for aftercare; one patient, when discussing rehabilitative strength training, stated, "Every week it's got to be 5 pounds more until I get up to being able to lift the litter for my cats."

As we moved into the next phase of the study, surveying a larger group of patients on the same topics we had covered in our previous interviews, we developed a question regarding factors that were important to patients in their postoperative care. We created a list and asked patients to check all of the factors that applied. Included on the list was the option "I have pets to care for." About 20% of the patients checked this item, making it the seventh-most important factor on a list of 16

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items that are potentially important to care planning following hip or knee surgery.

Pets are indeed important in many of our lives, and so they are important during the recovery period following events like hip or knee surgery. Pets provide emotional support, comfort, and companionship to their owners, factors that are vitally important to psychological health and well-being, especially during postoperative care and recovery³. Caring for pets, however, often involves activities such as walking, lifting, and bending in order to provide food and oversee animals' exercise and toileting needs. Lack of planning or inadequate planning for pet care could put patients in danger of engaging in activities that may be harmful. Worrying about the needs and ability to provide necessary care for pets can also take an emotional and psychological toll and could lead patients to unwise decisions and actions that set back their recovery. With these considerations in mind, surgeons and teams that develop care plans with patients for aftercare and

recovery from orthopaedic surgery may need to expand the list of items that they discuss with patients, adding the question: "Do you have pets you need to care for?" ■

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