

# Staff Perceptions of Animal-Assisted Interventions for Elderly Living in Nursing Homes



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## Background

Animal-assisted interventions (AAI) are a type of integrative therapy used in many healthcare settings to treat various physical and emotional health conditions. The elderly living in nursing homes (referred to as residents) have benefited from AAI. Studies have shown that AAI can reduce blood pressure and decrease loneliness in residents (Banks & Banks, 2002; Fine, 2006). While there have been studies that have examined the benefits of AAI for nursing home residents, little is known about the staff's knowledge and perceptions regarding AAI use in the nursing home.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess nursing staff's knowledge and perceptions about the use of AAI for residents in nursing homes. Nursing staff included registered nurses (RN), licensed practical nurses (LPN) and certified nursing assistants (CNA).

## Method

This study used a cross sectional design method and convenience sampling. To assess knowledge and perceptions, a survey was developed consisting of eight questions derived from a literature review assessing AAI knowledge and four questions assessing AAI perceptions. The surveys were distributed to two nursing homes, one in which AAI is intentionally integrated into the resident's care plans and one in which animals were occasionally present when volunteers and families brought in their pets.

## Demographic Information of Participants

		Registered Nurse (n=11)	Licensed Practical Nurse (n=10)	Certified Nursing Assistant (n=23)	Total (n=44)*
Gender	Female	90%	100%	95.7%	95%
	Male	10%	0%	4.3%	5%
Age	<40	9.1%	30%	59%	40%
	>40	90.9%	70%	41%	60%
Years in Position	<1 y	0%	14%	19%	11.8%
	1-5yr	27%	14%	37.5%	29.4%
	6-10yr	18%	14%	6%	11.8%
	11-40 yr	55%	58%	37.5%	47%
Previous experience with AAI	Yes	70%	83%	65%	69%
Pets in Home	Yes	90.9%	80%	82.6%	84%

\* Total sample size was 49

## Results

### Differences in Nursing Staff's Perceptions of AAI by Type of Nurse, Age, Previous Experience with AAI and Pets in Home

Question	Type of Nurse	Age	Previous experience with AAI (yes)	Pets in Home (yes)
1. Animal-assisted interventions should not be used in nursing homes because of the risk for allergies among residents.	2.759*	2.713*	.187	1.925
2. Animal-assisted interventions should not be used in nursing home because of the risk of fall among residents.	.196	.945	.009	4.965**
3. Animal-assisted interventions should not be used in nursing homes because not all cultures enjoy animals.	2.156	.778	.071	9.851***
4. Animal-assisted interventions should not be used in nursing homes because of the risk of infections and bacteria animals carry.	2.168	2.394*	.582	13.284***

\* p < .10, \*\* p < .05, \*\*\* p < .01



## References

Banks, M. R. & Banks, W. A. (2002). The effects of animal-assisted therapy on loneliness in the elderly population in long-term care facilities. *Journal of Gerontology: MEDICAL SCIENCES*, 57A(7), 428-432.  
Fine, A. H. (Eds.). (2006). *Handbook on animal assisted therapy: Theoretical foundation and guidelines for practice* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Elsevier

### AAI Knowledge and Perception Scores for Nursing Staff

Facility	Knowledge M (SD)	Perception M (SD)
Facility with AAI	7.42 (.75) Range: 6-8	2.07 (.71) Range: 1-3.5
Facility without AAI	7.46 (.99)* Range: 4-8	1.97 (.77)* Range: 1-4
Total	7.45 (.92) Range: 4-8	2.00 (.74) Range: 1-4

\* p < .001

There was a statistically significant relationship between staff's knowledge and perceptions in the facility without AAI. Nursing staff with greater knowledge of the benefits of AAI was related to more positive perceptions of AAI (r = -.624).

## Limitations

Only nursing staff from two nursing homes were included in the study and the sample size was small. The findings from this study cannot be generalized to other nursing homes using or not using AAI.

## Summary of Findings

The findings suggest that nursing home staff have a good understanding of the benefits of AAI and overall positive perceptions of AAI. No difference in knowledge and perception of AAI was found between the two nursing homes. Nursing staff who had pet had more positive perceptions of AAI in regards to concerns of falls, infections and cultural differences. Nursing staff who were older had more positive perceptions of AAI in regards to concerns of allergies and infection. RNs had more positive perceptions of AAI in regards to concerns of allergies. Having more knowledge regarding AAI was related to positive perceptions of AAI.

## Recommendations

Additional research studies are needed with larger sample sizes to further assess nursing staff's knowledge and perceptions related to AAI. In addition, studies including various healthcare settings and health professionals are needed to more fully assess knowledge and perceptions of AAI.