

# Fibromyalgia therapy dogs may improve daily life

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Christine Cioppa / March 23, 2017 / 0 Comments

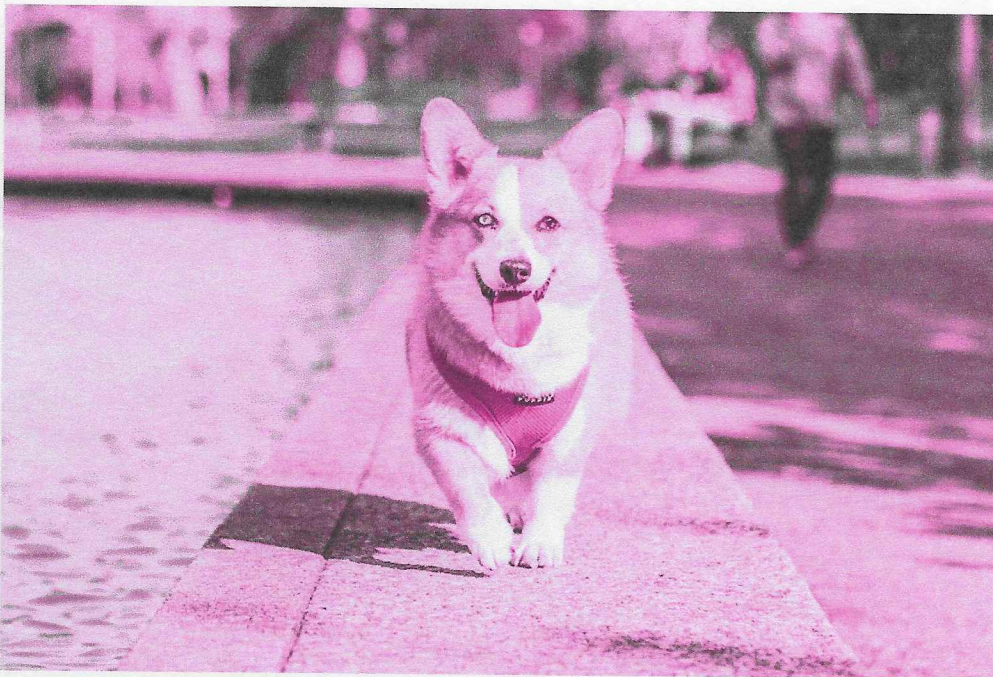


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What if a cute, cuddly dog is the Rx you need to help reduce fibromyalgia pain even more than your current therapies? It could just very well be! Fibromyalgia therapy dogs are gaining in popularity as a treatment.

Pain researchers who have studied the use of pet therapy for fibromyalgia have found that brief visits from fibromyalgia therapy dogs may be a “valuable complementary therapy” for fibromyalgia outpatients (and there are hints from researchers that a permanent therapy dog can help too!). The study “Impact of Animal-Assisted Therapy for Outpatients with Fibromyalgia,” published in *Pain Medicine*, found a pain severity reduction by 2 or more pain points (on a scale of 0–10) in fibromyalgia patients after a visit with a certified therapy dog that lasted 10 or more minutes. Only 4% of patients who waited in a waiting room without a visit from a therapy dog reported a reduction in pain compared to 34% of patients after the therapy dog visit.

Gianna Casini, MD, a pain fellow who works alongside study author Cheryl Bernstein, MD, discusses the study further:

"Visiting the doctor inherently is a stressful experience for most patients; this is especially significant for chronic pain patients. This can be attributed to the fact that more-often-than-not, chronic pain patients don't have significant improvements in their pain state from visit to visit, thus they have increased emotion and frustration, which can manifest itself in increased pain."

## Pros and Cons of Fibromyalgia Therapy Dogs

While the study was on brief therapy dog visits, Dr. Casini acknowledges that there could be benefits of having a permanent certified therapy dog, but that it would depend on the patient and his or her situation. "Some of our fibromyalgia patients express difficulty taking care of their own daily needs and would likely see a dog as a burden or source of anxiety rather than a therapeutic agent. This in turn, could exacerbate their pain state," says Dr. Casini.

On the flip side, there are a lot of pros of having a therapy dog. "Though our study didn't specifically seek to identify mechanisms for why animal presence improves pain scores in fibromyalgia patients, there is literature to support that animal-related pain improvement is secondary to reduction in stress hormones like epinephrine and norepinephrine. Further, anti-stress hormone levels, namely oxytocin and endorphins, are elevated following therapy dog visits," explains Dr. Casini.

Another consideration when looking at the pros and cons of a trained therapy dog is your whole health state, so discuss it with your team of doctors. A recent article on pet therapy published in the November 1, 2016, American Family Physician notes that while pet therapy has shown positive effects for some, it might not be a good idea for people with allergies or a fear of animals, or people at risk of animal-transmitted infections (the immunocompromised). There is also some risk of bites and scratches.

### Assistance Dogs or Fibromyalgia Therapy Dogs?

There are several types of dogs. Service dogs (or assistance dogs) can help people with disabilities who may need assistance with everyday tasks. Psychiatric service dogs (not the same as emotional support dogs, though they can also provide emotional support) assist with mitigating the effects of a psychiatric disability (e.g., Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD], severe depression, panic attacks). Therapy dogs are trained to provide therapeutic support. Emotional support dogs, sometimes called comfort dogs, can provide companionship as well as help relieve depression, anxiety and loneliness. Besides dogs, cats, birds and other animals can provide therapy through places like Pet Partners.

Some fibromyalgia therapy dogs live with people to help them and some dogs just visit a person at home, a hospital, or elsewhere.

Paws with a Cause (PAWS) Community Outreach Manager Deb Davis says that people with fibromyalgia "could most certainly benefit from an assistance dog." What is an assistance dog?

"Assistance dog is an umbrella term for any dog that provides a direct service to mitigate a person's disability, such as a service dog, hearing dog or guide dog."

Davis says that dogs can help people conserve energy by opening doors, retrieving a phone or dropped object, pulling laundry baskets, and doing other tasks; this can help people from getting too fatigued by daily living skills.

"Depending on the severity of a person's fibromyalgia, and their symptoms, a service dog could help them retrieve dropped objects when their fibromyalgia might be causing them the inability to get up and get around. Things that the client might not be able to use their fingers/dexterity for, due to their fibromyalgia, a service dog could help [with]. Additionally, if a client experiences the tingling, or numbness often associated with fibromyalgia, their grasp might not be as strong as it could be and they, therefore, wouldn't be able to do something like pull a sweater around their shoulders or remove gloves from their hands; a service dog could be trained to do these tasks for them," says Davis.

If applying for an assistance dog, your medical provider will need to provide information on your diagnosis/prognosis. Dr. Casini says if a patient seeks a dog (e.g., therapy, service or emotional), she would help. "I would write a letter in support of my patient pursuing a therapy dog for improvement of their pain state, as our paper has proven. Meta-analysis studies have been performed and support our data that animal-assisted therapies are effective adjuvants to other established therapies (i.e., medications, physical therapy, counseling). There are dogs that are trained for therapy, emotional or service. This would be specific to each patient's particular needs."

If you don't qualify for an assistance dog, a therapy dog could be beneficial. Fibromyalgia therapy dogs are trained to provide a therapeutic benefit, but they don't mitigate disabilities, says Davis. "Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), any assistance animal may accompany their owner into any public facilities or grounds; a therapy dog cannot accompany their owner without permission from the property's owner. Comfort dogs are the same as far as no public access."

Davis says that the cost of a dog varies across organizations that provide them. She adds that PAWS has placed trained dogs worth \$30,000 for free with clients.

Besides Paws with a Cause (PAWS), Assistance Dogs International, American Kennel Club, Therapy Dogs International, and Canine Companions for Independence, are some of the other organizations that provide information on trained assistance or therapy dogs.

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Hi Alisa! If you're looking for a Therapy Dog to visit people please look up Therapy Dog International to determine if you dog qualifies. If you think your dog could be a service dog there is no registration in the US. You'll need to find a behaviorist to evaluate your dog to see if s/he has the temperament for work. Then look for a trainer who can public access train your dog, desensitize them to different environments and strange things, and socialize them, this is a lengthy process typically taking around 2 years. Then you'll want to train the dog tasks to assist you. For example, my dog picks up and retrieves items for me, this is considered a task. Keep in mind not all dogs are cut out for the work as it can be quite stressful to most. You can read more about therapy and service dogs from these links:

[www.tdi-dog.org](http://www.tdi-dog.org)

[https://www.ada.gov/service\\_animals\\_2010.htm](https://www.ada.gov/service_animals_2010.htm)

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