

# Long-term care facility therapy animal visitation guidance

Animal-assisted therapy provides many benefits to individuals who live in long-term care facilities. Facilities should be familiar with the different categories of animal visitation and develop appropriate policies that follow applicable laws and regulations.

Healthcare facilities should establish infection prevention strategies, guidelines and policies for the animals, handlers, and residents in order to provide a safe environment. Some of the potential risks include allergies, phobias, potential animal-caused injuries, and diseases transmitted from animals to humans.

Animals in animal-assisted therapy programs must meet defined health and temperament requirements.

## Considerations for animal-assisted therapy programs:

1. The animal must be a domestic companion animal. Due to risks from disease and injury, the following should be excluded:
  - a. Nonhuman primates
  - b. Reptiles/amphibians
  - c. Hamsters, gerbils, mice, rats
  - d. Prairie dogs and hedgehogs
  - e. Animals not litter or potty trained
2. The animal should be registered or certified appropriately.
3. Health records and immunizations must be up to date.
4. The animal must be properly restrained by the handler.
5. The animal should never be left alone with a resident.
6. The facility should establish restrictions on where the animal is allowed in the building.
7. The handler must be healthy and free from communicable diseases.

## Infection prevention recommendations include:

1. Perform hand hygiene before and after contact with therapy animals.
2. The animal should avoid entering rooms where residents are on transmission based precautions.
3. Use appropriate personal protective equipment for residents and handlers.
4. Ensure animals do not lick or come into contact with open wounds or devices.
5. If the animal is allowed on a resident's bed, use a barrier between the animal and bed linens.
6. Practice social distancing in group therapy interactions whenever possible.

## Personal pet visits require the same strict requirements as animal-assisted therapy visits.

1. The pet should be bathed before the visit.
2. Health certificates and vaccines need to be up to date.
3. The visit should be restricted to the resident only.
4. Facilities may require a family member to accompany the pet while in the building.

Service animals differ in their roles from pets or therapy animals. Service animals are not considered pets. The ADA defines a service animal as an animal that is trained to do work or perform tasks for a person who has a disability. Healthcare facilities should be familiar with regulations covered under the [ADA](#). Animals that provide comfort or emotional support are not classified as service animals.

## References

American Kennel Club. (2022). *AKC Therapy Dog Program*. [www.akc.org](http://www.akc.org)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019, July). *Background H. Animals in Health-Care Facilities*. <https://www.cdc.gov/infectioncontrol/guidelines/environmental/background/animals.html>.

Darling, K., Boston, K.M., et al. (2014). *Animals Visiting in Healthcare Facilities*. APIC Text. <https://www.text.apic.org>.