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## Review article

# The use of small animals – mammals, birds, fish in zootherapy

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## ABSTRACT

Humans previously had a significantly greater connection with nature and bred animals primarily for their own benefit. Currently in today's fast-paced society, nature is being replaced by pet ownership. In some situations, people cannot have their own pets or do not have enough resources to take care of a living animal. The goal of this paper is to provide information relating to the use of small animals in the zootherapy and their impacts on clients. The use of animals for therapeutic purposes – zootherapy or animal therapy involves various forms. The most commonly used method of rehabilitation and therapeutic treatments are the use of the direct assistance of the animals. In both the broader world and in the Czech Republic, there are very widely used methods including the most well-known horses and dogs, hipotherapy and canistherapy. It is also possible to use other animal species and categories such as farm animals (cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and llamas) and other more exotic animals including the use of dolphins. These are used in addition to species that we could classify as small animals and pets. It is possible to include in this group of small pets, such creatures as cats, rabbits, ferrets, birds, fish, etc. For some species we briefly discuss the biology of these animals. They are also used in schools, zoos, hospitals and homes for the elderly. Homes for the elderly and hospitals can also benefit from birds (most of them already have parrots and other species). The other alternative is an aquarium with fish. The article describes the different types of zootherapies which, above all, has a positive influence on the mental and physical health of a person. The primary part deals with the use of specific types of small animals in the zootherapy. It is described in more details the use of cats, ferrets, rabbits, rodents, birds, and fish.

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## Introduction

Animal assisted therapy (AAT) is one of the methods of healing and rehabilitation of many diseases or mental health conditions

for humans, which only can presence help of an animal achieve positive change and improved mental health. The involvement of animals in the healing process reduces symptoms and improves the life of the patient [1]. These affects are not only the physical, mental, educational condition, but also the motivation

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of the person [2]. In 1929 it has been demonstrated there is decreased dog's blood pressure when they come in contact with a human, but 50 years later it has been demonstrated there is decreased blood pressure when humans come in contact with dogs [3]. These animals are a distraction and reassurance, thereby reducing the activation of the sympathetic nervous system, enhancing a sense of security, helping cope with depression and loneliness, enriching the lifestyle and the physical condition of the individual and slowing down the stress of illnesses [4]. Interactions between the therapist, animals and patients significantly increase communication, decreases blood pressure, reduces the heart rate and stress, increases mental and social sensibility [5]. A study of the influence of the presence of an animal on the anxiety in adult patients has found that in the presence of an animal, this has declined substantially, and anxiety levels in patients with mood disorders, and with psychological disorders anxiety has also been reduced [6]. For children with a spectrum of autistic disorders [7], an animal's presence sparked initially awkward and then halting and eventually a deliberate attempt to participate in society. The presence of animal treatment accelerates faster and there is a relationship between a child and a psychotherapist.

For the processing of this article, we used both Czech and foreign materials. They were located primarily in databases from ScienceDirect, PubMed, Elsevier, Scopus, and Web of Knowledge. We also used Google Scholar, which referred to the other materials listed above and other databases and other websites related to the use of these animals in zootherapy. There were also contributions from organizations, institutions, and private individuals (search words: zootherapy, AAT, pets, small animals, birds, fish, mammal; knockout words: dogs, pigs).

## Cats

The reason for the use of cats in zootherapy is because of fear of dogs or allergies to hair. For therapy, cats are preferable for individual breeding with known personality traits [8], but many cats are hard to train [9]. It is possible to use any breed of cat or hybrids older than one year. In the Czech Republic the most common domestic cats are ragdoll and Siberian cats. Gentle, balanced and friendly cats are more suitable for therapy [8,10]. They should be stroked and seek out human contact. The most suitable dogs and cats are those that are easily able to adjust to the environment, are able to endure transportation and are not afraid of loud noises and unexpected behaviours [9]. Cats are the most commonly used form of Guest book (visiting) service [10]. The participating client and the visiting team in an area designated facility, either outdoors (walking in the garden in the form of a cat on a leash), or within a time frame of no more than an hour maximum and 2 times per day [10]. Interaction with the cats provides tactile stimulation and helps improve both gross and fine motor skills (playing with toys, brushing, petting or feeding) [9]. The results of the study are [11] that cat owners have fewer psychiatric disorders and a better relationship with animals compared to those that do not own cats. In Czech Republic, felinotherapy has been practiced since 1997 by the Independent breeding club [12]. Felinotherapy or the use of

cats is a lesser known concept. This is not as widespread as canistherapy or hipotherapy and its benefits and positive effects cannot be ignored. It is ideal for the healing of neuroses, stress, restlessness, and heals psychological problems and anxiety. The indisputable advantage of felinotherapy is that it can take place even in confined spaces. It has many positive effects, as indicated by Kadlecová [13]. These effects include physical, especially to prevent distractions and stress and they help the social effects regarding the ability to "break the ice" and be psychological "free", thus getting emotional support (we cease to focus on the problems and we tend to animals once gently and slowly, thus themselves calms).

## Ferrets

The ferret is a domesticated form of a dark polecat, but unlike the polecat, is active during the day [14]. They are promoted even in zootherapy, especially abroad, but they are also used in the Czech Republic. In the USA, ferrets are currently used by the organization Paws For Friendship Inc. [15]. In the Czech Republic, the most experienced people with these animal are the club of breeders and supporters of ferrets in the Guest book (visiting) service in therapeutic and social rehabilitation programmes for children from orphanages and homes for clients for seniors working with them. The founder of this club is Petra Nerandžičová. Ferrets are easy to tame and adapt, are curious and love to play. Young ferret communicate with human through a variety of sounds, do not bite, and like to be stroked. They are fine when hearing different manifestations of sounds (e.g. by autistic children) [14]. They tolerate both travel and a limited outdoor living space, and can live up to 5–8 years [16]. The disadvantage is a strong odour from the anal sebaceous glands which can be treated by neutering or spaying [17]. Male weighs 2 kg and females about 800 g [18]. Ferrets can tolerate high temperature, however, the most suitable temperature range for them is between 15 and 21 °C. The animals start from 1 year and up to 5 years of age. Most preferable is the Guest book (visiting) service, where therapists with a ferret running for the patients home or facility, helping to socialize and mentally calming the clients [16]. The most commonly applied is in social rehabilitation, which the owner gets both attention and respect [10]. The positive impact of ferrets on a child with mild autism (biased towards dogs and cats) described by Stout [19], when ferrets at a relative hurt initially alarmed watched and guarded against others, then he looks after them and then chose one. First, they repeated words and movements then began to talk to him. Ferrets helped him to be included in major Baseball League for healthy children, other children, he stopped and began to taunt him with greater recognition. If you were in the audience, he was flattened and played better.

## Rabbits

Domestic rabbits are a domesticated form of the wild rabbit. There are a number of breeds with short, angora and short rex hair, weighing 1–7 kg or more [20]. Smaller breeds are more lively, inquisitive and agile, but have a more independent temperament [14]. They are prone to some diseases and should be annually vaccinated against rabbit plague, and from

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