

Effects of dog-assisted therapy in adolescents with eating disorders: A study protocol for a pilot controlled trial

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Abstract

Background: Eating disorders are characterized by a persistent disturbance that alters food intake and it is often accompanied by anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, or reduced functional capacity and quality of life. Animal-assisted therapies (AAT) have shown benefits in these variables in children and adult populations. Thus, the present pilot study will aim to evaluate the effects of a dog-assisted therapy on the eating disorders symptoms, mental, psychosocial, and physical health, quality of life, and handgrip strength of adolescents suffering from eating disorders. **Methods:** The current pilot study will involve 32 patients, who will be assigned to a control or an experimental group. Intervention will be conducted once a week for seven weeks. Neither the experimental nor the control group will discontinue their usual care. The main outcome measures will be the eating disorder symptoms and the health-related quality of life measured with standardized questionnaires, while the secondary variables will be anxiety, depression, character, behavior, strength, and body mass. **Conclusions:** This pilot-controlled trial will be the first to evaluate the effects of dog-assisted therapy on the physical and mental health of adolescents with eating disorders. Significant improvements, in the primary and secondary outcomes, may be expected based on the known benefits of AAT on self-esteem, stress, and self-control in different populations. Finally, although the program is focused on the improvement of adolescents' health, animal welfare will be a priority in this study. © 2021 by the authors.

Author keywords

Animal-assisted therapies; Anorexia nervosa; Bulimia nervosa; Mental health