

How do I get an Assistance Animal?



Assistance Animals are trained to alleviate the effects of a person's disability. These animals are purpose-trained to meet standards of hygiene and behaviour appropriate to a public place. Some Assistance Animals are bred, trained and placed by an organisation, whilst others are trained by their handler in a process known as self-training.

Am I eligible for an Assistance Animal?

If you have a disability that falls within the definition of a 'disability' as defined in Part 4 of the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)* you are eligible to be accompanied by an Assistance Animal in a public space. However, not everyone who meets this definition will be suited to an Assistance Animal for any number of reasons.



What is the first step?

The first step is to consider whether an Assistance Animal is right for you. It is important to be assessed by an Occupational Therapist (OT) to ensure that you have exhausted all other assistive technology and other possibilities before looking at an Assistance Animal. Like a major bathroom renovation, all other options must be exhausted first.

A prescription from an OT is also considered to be best practice when obtaining an Assistance Animal. Some of the larger pre-training organisations will have OTs on staff who can fulfil this step for you.



Do I have to choose a dog?

Absolutely not! The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (Cth)* states that any species may be an Assistance Animal. However, dogs are the most common species chosen. So far, the Working Animals Federation of Australia has provided support to handlers of the following species: dogs, cats, miniature horses, ferrets, rabbits, guinea pigs, geese, parrots, pigs, miniature donkeys and ducks. That said, dogs are by far the most common species.

Now what?

Your OT will help you to consider whether a pre-trained or self-trained Assistance Animal would be best suited to your situation.

A pre-trained Assistance Animal is one that has already been trained and is ready to be paired with you. Once team training has been undertaken where you learn to work with your Assistance Animal, you and your Assistance Animal will undertake a Public Access Test (PAT) which qualifies you for public access.



A self-trained Assistance Animal is one which is yet to be trained. You may choose to purchase or adopt an animal under 5 years of age, or assess whether a pet may be suitable for Assistance Animal work. Working with a professional trainer, you will select and then train the animal to meet your needs and the standards required for public access. Once the animal has been suitably trained you and your Assistance Animal will usually undertake a Public Access Test (PAT) which qualifies you for public access. An animal typically spends the first 6 months of training as a Prospect where basic obedience is perfected, before progressing to an Assistance Animal in Training. Once the PAT is completed you will have a fully-fledged Assistance Animal.



A PAT assessor must be impartial. The Working Animal Federation of Australia (WAFA) defines this as meaning the assessor must not have any family relationship or friendship with the handler team, nor have any financial or other interest in the success of a PAT. For example, an employee cannot conduct a PAT for a fellow employee or board member of the same organisation.



How do I choose an Animal?

Larger organisations that provide pre-trained Assistance Animals will work to pair you with a suitable animal that meets your needs and lifestyle.

Individuals who choose to self-train should work with a qualified, accredited and experienced trainer and their OT to select an animal with the greatest likelihood of success in the role of Assistance Animal. You may elect to purchase a pure-bred from a breeder, or consider working with a rescue or shelter to adopt a suitable candidate. When it comes to breeders, you should look for those who have well bred show- or working-lines who have previously placed their offspring working as successful Assistance Animals.

What else is necessary?

Any animal needs to be tested for medical suitability for the role, as well as behavioral suitability. This may include x-rays, blood tests and any other assessments recommended by your veterinarian.

So then I'm done?

Not quite! Assistance Animals require ongoing maintenance. This means that every 6 months you will typically meet with your organisation or trainer to fine-tune any necessary skills or training related to your partnership. At least once every 12-24 months you will usually complete a Public Access Test (PAT) to ensure that your animal remains fit for public access. You will also continue to work with your OT throughout your Assistance Animals life.

Are all Assistance Animals funded?

Each handler may apply to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA), Aged Care, Workers Compensation or other government agency for funding of their Assistance Animal. The NDIS may fund purchase, training or ongoing maintenance of the Assistance Animal. As of January 2024, less than 600 Assistance Animals receive some form of funding from the NDIS. Some organisations also provide Assistance Animals free-of-charge to eligible individuals. However, many individuals choose to self-fund their Assistance Animal.



Anything else I need to know?

Not all Prospects or Assistance Animals in Training (AAiT) make the cut. Many are deemed unsuitable and are 'washed' from training. These animals are either rehomed or remain with you as a pet for the remainder of their life. The Working Animals Federation of Australia (WAFA) deems an Assistance Animal to be 'washed' or retired once they fail the PAT three consecutive times, unless there are extenuating circumstances. A retired animal will also be rehomed or remain with you as a pet for the remainder of their life.

