



Should you sleep with your dog?

For some puppy parents, there's nothing better than cuddling with their pooches at bedtime. In fact, research shows that nearly 50% of all pet owners report sleeping next to their dogs.

Do you let your dog sleep in your bed with you at night? Research has shown that slightly less than one-half of all pet owners share their bed or bedroom with their pet. Even so, you have likely been told by at least one well-meaning person that your dog should sleep on the floor, in his crate, or in his own bed. However, according to recent research, there are many benefits to co-sleeping with your dog, and there is nothing to be ashamed of. Here are some interesting facts regarding this:

- Humans and dogs have been sleeping together in some cultures for centuries.
- Newborn puppies huddle together because that's when they feel the safest, and most comfortable - it's in their nature. When your dog wants to sleep beside you, it's because they consider you 'part of the pack'.
- Sleeping with your dog can ease anxiety and provide feelings of safety and security. 'Hard day at the office? When we climb into bed at night, we have a tendency to worry and overthink - which results in a not-so-great night's sleep. Spending time with our dogs, whether it be taking them for a walk, or having them beside us in bed can lower our cortisol levels, which is the hormone our body releases when we're stressed out. Lower cortisol levels don't just come with mental health benefits either, physical too! The release of cortisol can also cause heightened blood pressure, which can lead to several complications including; heart attacks, strokes and memory issues.'
- However, dog and human sleep cycles differ and this can affect the quality of sleep.

The journal *Human Nature* recently published a study by Smith et al. entitled "A Multispecies Approach to Co-Sleeping: Integrating Human-Animal Co-Sleeping Practices into Our Understanding of Human Sleep."¹ The researchers looked at the practice of allowing a dog to sleep in the bed or bedroom, comparing it with adult-child co-sleeping.

The study pointed out that sleeping in the same bed or bedroom as our pets is not just a modern phenomenon. In fact, some traditional cultures considered co-sleeping with animals as beneficial. For example, Aboriginal Australians often slept beside their dogs and/or dingoes for warmth and protection from evil spirits. Unfortunately, modern culture tends to focus on the negative aspects of co-sleeping rather than the benefits.

It's true there are some health concerns related to co-sleeping with your dog. Human allergies can be aggravated, for example. There is also the risk of transmission of disease, from both the dog to the human and the human to the dog. However, such transmission is rare.

Quality of sleep can also be affected. Previous studies have shown that owners sharing a bed with their pet report greater sleep disturbances than people whose pets did not sleep in their bed. One factor that may explain this difference is that dogs are polyphasic sleepers and average three sleep/wake cycles per night time hour, whereas humans are monophasic sleepers (one period of sleep over a 24-hour cycle). Dogs also stay alert for sounds, even when sleeping, which may make them lighter sleepers than their humans sleeping.



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Urban myths abound about dogs sharing their human's sleeping spot. For example, your dog will think he's dominant to you or he will become spoiled. While there can be a link between bed-sharing and behaviour problems, it's not known whether co-sleeping creates the problem or the problem leads to co-sleeping in the first place. For example, a dog that shares his owner's bed might have problems with separation anxiety. However, did the co-sleeping create the excessive attachment or did the dog's excessive attachment cause the owner to let him into the bed?

Sometimes, the issues are unrelated, and co-sleeping simply highlights already existing problem behaviour. For example, a dog with resource guarding issues might growl and bark to protect his sleeping spot on your bed. But the problem is really about your dog unnecessarily defending what he sees as his items and territory, not about the co-sleeping. For a well-adjusted, well-behaved dog, it's quite unlikely that sleeping in your bed or bedroom will do anything except delight your dog, comfort you, and enhance the dog-owner bond. But if your dog is showing signs of aggression or any other problem behaviour that is being worsened by co-sleeping, provide your dog with his own sleeping space while you consult with a professional trainer, a behaviour consultant, or your veterinarian.

Despite the drawbacks to co-sleeping with a dog, the researchers explain that so many owners do it because the benefits likely outweigh the disadvantages. Studies have shown many physical and mental health advantages to owning a pet, and co-sleeping increases the amount of time spent with that pet, potentially increasing those benefits. For example, co-sleeping can increase the feelings of comfort and companionship your dog provides.

Co-sleeping with your dog can also ease anxiety and provide a feeling of safety and security. Your light-sleeping canine will alert you to anything out of the ordinary, so you can rest easy through the night. Dogs are also perfect bed warmers, keeping you toasty on a cold night. And finally, there is no substitute for waking up to a tail-wagging dog.

The research study concluded that even though society may not currently regard co-sleeping in the best light, because of the many benefits, there is no need for unnecessary concern. I think those of us who share our beds and bedrooms with our dogs already know that any disturbance or inconvenience is well worth a night time of snuggles.

Article from the American Kennel Club website:

"Should I Let My Dog Sleep With Me?" By Stephanie Gibeault, MSc, CPDT

References

1. (Extract from Human Nature) Journal

A Multispecies Approach to Co-Sleeping: Integrating Human-Animal Co-Sleeping Practices into Our Understanding of Human Sleep by Bradley Smith, Peta C hazelton, Kirrilly R Thompson, Joshua L. Trigg, Hayley C, Etherton & Sarah L. Blunden.

