

Does Your Dog Sleep Like This?

How your dog sleeps says a lot about how she feels about life - and you. Depending on if she sleeps curled up in a ball, stretched out on her back or side, or flopped out on her belly, you can gain clues about her feelings of trust, calmness, independence, affection and bonding with you.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- The positions your dog chooses to sleep in can tell you quite a bit about how she's feeling about her life
- Your dog's sleep positions can also mirror evolutionary behaviors designed to keep canines in the wild protected from the elements and safe from predators
- Two of the more entertaining sleep positions dogs take are the flat on the back pose, and the flat on the belly pose
- Canine and human sleep patterns differ, which is why it often seems our dogs need a lot more sleep than we do

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If you're a dog parent, I'm sure you've noticed that your furry family member sleeps. A lot. Which is normal, by the way. Healthy adult dogs spend an average of 12 to 14 hours a day sacked out. Pups, seniors and dogs with health problems often need even more rest.

Since our dogs spend so much time sleeping, we're familiar with the wide assortment of positions they take, and this goes double if your pet sleeps on your bed, lap or chest. What you might not realize is there's sometimes an evolutionary force behind your dog's body language while snoozing. The following is a cheat sheet for interpreting the meaning behind your pet's sleep positions.

6 Dog Sleeping Positions and What They Mean

1. **Curled up in a ball (aka the donut or fuzzy bagel position)** — Dogs often sleep curled up in a tight ball, with their nose touching their tail. Dr. Katherine Houpt, a behavioral medicine professor at Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, has observed that this is the preferred position for dogs in shelters. "They almost all sleep that way when they're undisturbed — in balls, curled up," Houpt told PetMD.¹

This sleeping position conserves body heat (which is why we tend to see it more often during the cooler months of the year) and also protects internal organs from predators, which is why dogs in the wild tend to dig nests and curl up in them for both warmth and protection.

2. **On the back (aka crazy legs)** — This is probably among the weirdest, yet cutest sleeping position dogs assume. If you find your pup stretched out on his back, with one or both front legs stretched out, he's exposing his belly, which is a sign of submissiveness and vulnerability.

His willingness to fall asleep in this position means he's feeling very secure and relaxed in his environment. On the other hand, he could also just be feeling a bit overheated, and exposing his tummy helps cool his body down. Dogs who sleep in this position regularly are typically independent and calm.

3. **The cuddler** — Dogs who cuddle up with their humans, or sleep back-to-back with other pets in the household, are remembering their puppy pasts when they napped with their littermates to conserve body heat. If your dog likes to maintain contact with you while she sleeps, she's showing she trusts you, and the feeling is probably mutual, since surveys indicate that 56% of dog parents sleep next to their dogs.
4. **The belly flop (aka the superman)** — This sleep position is adorably funny, because what's not to love about a dog lying flat on his tummy with his front and back legs extended straight out? Looking down at him, it's easy to imagine he's about to belly flop into a pool or fly away to save the day! Dog behavior expert Dr. Stanley Coren believes this position also relates to temperature.

"The fur on the dog's underside is not as deep and insulating as the fur on the rest of his body," he tells PetMD. "What you call the 'Superman position' — with limbs outstretched and belly against the floor — is also a response to a warm environment, but usually occurs in situations where the surface that the dog is lying on is relatively cooler than the air around him."

Since it's easy for dogs to get to their feet in this position, they tend only to use it for catnaps and not for serious snoozing.

5. **Side sleeping** — This is the most common position dogs take for sleeping, according to Coren. And that's a good thing, because when your dog naps lying on her side, it means she's relaxed and comfortable in her environment. Side sleeping pups also tend to be affectionate and share a close bond with their humans.
6. **The lion pose** — The lion pose is similar to the belly flop, with two important distinctions: the back legs are under the haunches instead of pushed out, and the muscles of the body are contracted, preventing deep sleep. Dogs generally get into this position to relieve stress and make themselves more comfortable. It's often seen in dogs with lots of energy to burn, who don't feel like sleeping and are waiting for an opportunity to leap into action.

Other Ways Your Dog's Sleep Differs From Yours

Beyond sleeping positions, the major difference between human and canine sleep patterns is the amount of time spent in REM (rapid eye movement) sleep, which is the most restorative stage of sleep and plays a role in learning and memory. In REM sleep, the brain is active and there may be dreaming. Humans spend about 25% of their night in REM sleep, compared to about 10% for dogs. This means dogs need more total sleep to get adequate restorative sleep.²

While humans tend to do best with a set sleep-wake schedule, dogs are much more flexible, so you needn't worry about getting your dog to bed on time or up by a certain hour. Generally speaking, dogs follow their natural impulses, including sleeping when they need it, which is why they don't often sleep for eight-hour stretches.

If it seems your dog can go from deeply asleep to fully alert in the blink of an eye, and in response to even the slightest noise or disruption, it's not in your head. One Australian study found that during an eight-hour nighttime period, dogs averaged 23 sleep-wake episodes, with the average sleep-wake cycle consisting of 16 minutes asleep followed by five minutes awake.³

This doesn't necessarily mean you'll be aware your dog is awake — he'll likely lie quietly. It also doesn't mean he's not getting quality rest, but if he seems especially restless or is unable to find a comfortable position to sleep in, you should have him checked out by your veterinarian to rule out pain or other symptoms or health conditions that could be keeping him awake.

Something I recommend for all pet parents is a grounding mat, which can help balance your dog's circadian rhythm, particularly if he doesn't spend much time outdoors. Wild animals are naturally grounded to the earth, which provides numerous benefits due to the transfer of electrons from the ground to their body.

You can also unplug wireless routers at night to give your pet a break from electromagnetic fields (EMFs). For dogs who seem unable to settle down, a grounding mat can be very beneficial.

In addition, be sure to provide a comfortable, adequately sized bed, made from **natural materials**, in a quiet, cozy spot. Depending on your dog's favorite sleeping position, you can choose a dog bed to match.

For instance, dogs who sleep curled up may like a round bed with deep sides, whereas side sleepers may prefer a cushioned, flatter surface to spread out on. For belly or back sleepers, an elevated bed may help keep them cool and supported.

Turn off all lights and loud sounds (TVs and radios) when going to bed; this can disrupt your dog's ability to produce enough melatonin to sleep soundly, but don't forget to open your blinds and shades in your home the next morning (dogs need access to direct sunlight to produce healthy daytime hormones, too!).

Sources and References

¹ [PetMD, December 7, 2018](#)

² [National Sleep Foundation, How Much Do Dogs Sleep](#)

³ [Applied Animal Behaviour Science Volume 36, Issues 2-3, April 1993, Pages 233-248](#)
