

Is Sharing Sheets With Your Pooch Healthy?

The latest research questions the benefits of sharing your bed with pets, revealing potential sleep disturbances. Explore the complex relationship between pet co-sleeping habits and the quest for undisturbed slumber.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Recent studies suggest that pet parents whose dog or cat shares their bed experience a variety of sleep disturbances
- One way to reasonably assure a good night's sleep alongside your pet is to provide your dog or cat ample physical and mental stimulation during the day, and bedtime rituals that complement their natural instincts
- Setting bedtime ground rules on day one with a new pet is the best way to avoid challenging situations going forward
- If you find it necessary down the line to have your pet sleep elsewhere than your bed, it can be done, although it will take consistency and patience

If you have furry family members in your household, you may be aware there is long-standing scientific interest in the pluses and minuses of pets sleeping in their humans' beds. I'm assuming the reason behind this is that many people have trouble sleeping these days, and a majority of pet parents "co-sleep" with their animal companions.

One of the latest explorations into the topic is a new (2023) study published in the journal *Human-Animal Interactions*¹ that finds that despite the many positive effects of pet ownership on health, "your beloved pet may be hurting your sleep."²

Data Collection and Analysis

To arrive at this conclusion, the study co-authors analyzed data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, adjusted for sleep-related factors such as race, income, age, gender, and BMI (body mass index), and focused on whether a person had a sleep disorder and also a dog or cat. The researchers measured sleep quality using the following parameters:

- Bouts of snoring or snorting at night
- Waking up too early
- Being diagnosed with a sleep disorder
- Feeling unrested
- Having trouble sleeping
- Regularly getting less than 6 hours of sleep

- Taking longer than 15 minutes to fall asleep
- Needing medication to sleep
- Waking up during the night
- Having leg jerks or cramps

Dogs, Cats May Trigger Separate Sleep-Related Problems

The study co-authors found that dog owners had a greater chance of having a sleep disorder and trouble sleeping in general, and interestingly, cat parents were more likely to have leg jerking at night.

It's important to note that the study was observational, meaning the researchers couldn't conclusively find that pets interfered with sleep; however, the results were consistent with previous studies showing that pet ownership negatively affects sleep quality.

It's also important to note that the study didn't examine where in bed the pets slept. For example, is the dog stretched out across the bed, allowing for less room for the owner? Or is the cat laying across the owner's lower legs, restricting movement?

Tips for a Good Night's Sleep With Pets

According to a report by NBC News, another sleep researcher, Lieve van Egmond of the Uppsala Sleep Science Laboratory in Sweden, who wasn't involved with the study discussed above, noticed her sleep pattern changed when she got a kitten.³ She subsequently led a separate study published in 2021⁴ that also used self-reported data to examine how pets affect sleep.

The results of her study showed that having a cat was linked with shorter night's sleep, but dog ownership wasn't a factor in sleep. Van Egmond suggests more research is needed to determine whether the findings of her study were a coincidence, or if pets truly cause sleep issues. She also believes the new study probably has more to do with simply owning a pet and the many different factors related to that particular cat or dog, rather than where the pets sleep.

"The age of the pet has a big influence on whether or not they keep you up at night," says van Egmond. "If you have multiple pets, they can egg each other on."

In the case of dogs, both breed and activity level play a role. Pets who get plenty of daily physical activity, mental stimulation, and opportunities to express their natural instincts tend — along with their humans — to rest better at night.

Compared to dogs, cats are definitely a different species when it comes to nocturnal activity. Unlike their canine counterparts, cats tend to experience bursts of energy during the night. For example, Bacco, van Egmond's kitten, ran circles around her apartment in the dark, and scratched at the bedroom door if it was closed.

Van Egmond consulted a cat behaviorist for help and learned that if she played with Bacco before bedtime, activating the kitty's hunting instinct, and then fed him, he would groom himself after his meal and go to sleep.

Setting Some Ground Rules

Some of the reasons why pets disturb their owners during the night are easily explained. Your pet may need to be let outside to urinate. Or he may be cold and prefer sleeping under your covers to sleeping in his crate, no matter how cozy. Some dogs tend to be cuddlers by nature and are simply happier sleeping by your side.

In other cases, however, the disturbance may present more of a mystery. A dog that wakes up frequently to urinate may have a **urinary tract infection**. A cat that wanders aimlessly during the night and cries out for no apparent reason may be experiencing **cognitive decline**. If medical problems have been ruled out, there's a good chance some of your pet's nighttime behaviors may even have been created, in part, by you.

When you add a new pet to your family, this is the best time to decide where you want your pet to sleep. If she'll be sleeping in her own space, such as a crate, start her there from day one to avoid a struggle later. If you allow your dog or cat to sleep on your bed, she'll quickly claim the spot as her own.

If you allow your pet to share your bed or your bedroom, you also need to set up some ground rules. If your cat wants to have a play session at 3 a.m. and you indulge her, you can expect her to wake you up again the next night — likewise if your dog begs for food at midnight.

There are some proactive things you can do to avoid situations such as these, for example, making sure your cat gets ample **playtime during the day**, and moving your dog's dinnertime a bit later to sustain him overnight.

Ultimately, however, if you expect to sleep through the night, it's important that you set a schedule for your pet that includes playtime, exercise and feeding during daylight hours only ... and stick to it. (If you have a puppy or kitten, this doesn't apply, as you can expect them to need attention during the night.)

Transitioning Your Pet to a New Sleeping Arrangement

For many pet owners, the comfort of having their pets close by during the night outweighs an occasional sleep disturbance. If, however, you find that your sleep is being intolerably disrupted and you need to make a change, it is possible — although it will take some consistence and patience.

If your pet is a dog:

- Invest in a good-quality dog bed and place it at the side or foot of your bed. Add pillows, blankets, and special nighttime toys as you see fit.
- Teach your dog to get off your bed and onto his bed on command, using praise, treats and affection each time he executes the desired behavior.
- Remember: reinforcing good behavior is how dogs learn. Give your pup no attention while he's on your bed; lavish attention on him when he is on his own bed on the floor.
- Understand your dog will continue to jump up on your bed at night for a while. You are his "pack" and nature is telling him to sleep as close as possible to you. Each time he jumps up on your bed give the command to get down.
- After several nights or even a week or two of being commanded (repeatedly) off the bed, your dog may learn to wait until you're asleep to join you. He's not being sneaky or disobedient — he's following his instincts as a

pack animal whose leader has always been right next to him in bed. With patience, persistence and consistency, your pup will eventually figure out his new sleeping spot is on the floor.

If your pet is a cat:

I must be honest with you — this will be a much bigger project. Unlike dogs who are attached first to their pack, cats are attached to what they perceive as their territory. If she's been sleeping with you at night, make no mistake — your bed is her territory.

- You won't be able to keep your feline BFF off your bed if she's in your bedroom, so I recommend you not even try. You can shoo her away before you drift off, but she'll be right back on "her" bed long before you fall fully asleep.
- Shutting kitty out of the bedroom is not likely to be as simple as it sounds, either. Cats don't take kindly to forfeiting territory. She may cause an unholy ruckus right outside the door — crying, yowling, thumping, smacking at the door handle, scratching at the floor. Or she might become destructive from frustration.
- You'll need to try to entice your cat to other places in your house at night with things like treat-release foraging toys, other favorite toys, or maybe a kitty condo or perch near an outside light so she can look through the window for flying prey. Also provide her with soft, warm bedding if she doesn't already have a favorite napping spot elsewhere in the house. Creativity and lots of patience are the keys to success here. You must give your cat something to do besides obsess over no longer being allowed in the bed she so generously shared with you.

Sources and References

¹ [Medlin, K. and Wisnieski, L. Human-Animal Interactions, March 17, 2023](#)

^{2,3} [NBCNews.com, March 16, 2023](#)

⁴ [van Egmond, L.T. et al. Scientific Reports 2021; 11:7468](#)
