

Do Dogs Dream?

If your sleeping dog suddenly twitches and whimpers, don't be alarmed — chances are they're probably off to dreamland. Here's what you need to know about dreaming in dogs.

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs likely experience dreams during REM sleep, similar to humans. They may twitch, move their legs and whimper while dreaming, often reliving memorable moments from their day
- A dog's sleep cycle includes slow wave sleep (SWS) and rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. REM sleep, where dreaming occurs, typically begins about 20 minutes after falling asleep
- Dream patterns in dogs can vary based on age, breed, and size. Puppies and senior dogs tend to dream more frequently, while smaller breeds dream more often but for shorter durations
- Dogs often dream about their daily experiences and activities they find interesting. Studies suggest they may dream about their owners, as they are emotionally attached to them
- It's important not to wake a dreaming dog, even if they appear distressed. Disturbing their sleep can be startling and potentially dangerous, especially for children who might get bitten accidentally

Your dog is sleeping peacefully by your side, when all of a sudden, their nose starts twitching, their tail and/or legs moving, and they start letting out small whimpers. Are these signs that Fido has drifted off to doggo dreamland?

Indeed, scientists believe that dogs can have dreams. In fact, there's evidence that dogs dream similarly to humans — usually replaying unforgettable moments from their day.¹

Understanding Your Dog's Sleep Cycle

To fully understand how dogs dream, you must first become familiar with the sleep process. Just like in people, sleep is crucial for your dog's growth — it's the time when the body recharges and the brain processes all the information and experiences that happened during the day. According to an article in VCA:²

"During sleep, the brains of humans and dogs function similarly and exhibit brain wave patterns that show a difference between the two basic stages of the sleep cycle. When you or your dog first fall asleep, you experience slow wave sleep (SWS), when brain waves are slow and undulating.

During this stage of the sleep cycle, mental processes are quiet, but muscles are still active, so the body is not totally relaxed. Your dog will appear to be resting calmly, but they can easily be awakened during SWS."

When your dog enters the rapid eye movement (REM) stage of sleep, you may notice their eyes moving wildly beneath their closed eyelids, as if they're searching for something — this is a deeper stage of sleep, where the brain waves are faster and more irregular. The muscles are more relaxed, but the mind is more active.

In an average dog, REM sleep may occur 20 minutes after they have fallen asleep. Aside from eye movements, other signs that your dog has entered this stage include whining, rapid breathing and leg movements.

"Humans and dogs experience both stages of the sleep cycle. We know that humans dream, and since the sleeping brains of dogs and people go through similar stages of electrical activity, it is safe to assume that dogs dream, too," the article explains.³

When humans and dogs dream, they usually process the information they gathered in the day and may "relive" these memories. However, there's a part of your brain called the pons that prevents you from physically acting out these moments.

Your Dog's Dream Patterns May Depend on Their Age, Breed and Size

Some dogs dream more than others, and several factors may affect how frequently they drift off to dreamland. One example is their age. If you have a puppy and an adult dog in your home, you may notice the pup dreaming more frequently than the adult dog.

This is because puppies' young, innocent minds are still curious. Puppies undergo more experiences daily, as they are still exploring and getting to know the world. Hence, they acquire large amounts of new information, giving them plenty of moments to process at night. According to VetStreet, senior dogs are also prone to dream more than younger adult dogs.⁴

Your dog's size can also influence their dream patterns, according to research. For example, a toy poodle or a Chihuahua dreams every 10 minutes, while a Labrador Retriever only dreams once every 60 to 90 minutes. However, the small breed's dream may last only a minute, while the larger breed's dream may last for five to 10 minutes.⁵

Researchers also found that your dog's breed can also be indicative of the type of dream they can be having. According to an article in Psychology Today:⁶

"A dreaming Pointer may immediately start searching for a game and may even go on point, a sleeping Springer Spaniel may flush an imaginary bird in his dreams, while a dreaming Doberman pincher may pick a fight with a dream burglar."

Your Dog Dreams of You

As mentioned, dogs often dream about the experiences they have lived — studies wherein the pons have been disabled found that dogs "act out" their dreams, doing paw and lip movements that mimic activities like playing, fighting and eating.⁷

Your dog also dreams about the most important thing in their life — you. According to studies, dogs don't dream in a logical way, but rather more visually. They more often dream about things they find interesting and are emotionally attached to and, to most dogs, that is their owner.

According to Dr. Deirdre Barrett, a clinical and evolutionary psychologist at Harvard Medical School:⁸

“Humans dream about the same things they’re interested in by day, though more visually and less logically. There’s no reason to think animals are any different. Since dogs are generally extremely attached to their human owners, it’s likely your dog is dreaming of your face, your smell and of pleasing or annoying you.”

But if dogs can have dreams, can they also have nightmares? Apparently so. A dog that’s having a nightmare may have more intense movements while sleeping, often whining or thrashing about, or may even run in place. Don’t be frightened, however, and resist the urge to wake them up.

Remember the Saying ‘Let Sleeping Dogs Lie’

Seeing your dog whimpering or moving around while they are asleep may seem alarming, but do not rouse them. Not only will you disrupt their sleep during the REM cycle, which is startling and unpleasant, but it can also be dangerous for you, as your dog may be too startled and accidentally bite you.

However, if you feel like the dream (or nightmare) is getting too intense and you must wake your pup up, do so without touching them. Simply call out their name gently or speak to them in a soothing manner.

If you have young children at home, teach them this important lesson as well. According to VCA, “Approximately 60% of dog bites in children occur when the child wakes a sleeping dog.”⁹ Make sure to provide a comfortable and quiet sleeping area for your pet, too.

Sources and References

¹ [American Kennel Club, April 20, 2021](#)

^{2,3,5,9} [VCA Animal Hospitals, Do Dogs Dream?](#)

⁴ [VetStreet, December 12, 2012](#)

⁶ [Psychology Today, October 28, 2010](#)

⁷ [Forbes, June 8, 2023](#)

⁸ [Animal Scene, April 12, 2022](#)
