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Should Pets Be Banished From the Bedroom?

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Should Pets Be Banished From the Bedroom?

Is it OK to sleep with your pets?

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If you own a pet, you probably let it sleep in your bed. I do, and I am not alone. According to a 2012 Harris poll, about 70 percent of American dogs and cats at least occasionally share their owner's bed. The demographics of pet co-sleeping are what you might expect: more women sleep with their pets than men, more cats than dogs are allowed in the bed, and large dogs are less likely to be "co-sleepers" than small dogs.

But should you really slumber with a Clumber (an obscure spaniel breed)? Not if you believe sensationalized media reports. For example, a recent Huffington Post headline warned "Sorry, Pet Lovers, It's Time To Stop Sharing The Bed." And NBC news announced "It's Out of the Sack, Cat!"

These scary news stories were based on a Center for Disease report titled "Zoonoses in the Bedroom," in which public health veterinarians Bruno Chomel and Ben Sun linked sleeping with pets with a host of serious maladies. These included meningitis, Chagas disease, cat-scratch fever, MRSA - the skin eating bacteria, staph infections, and even the plague. (**See note below.) But I think these news reports are overblown. The CDC report, for example, was based on a conglomeration of very rare cases.

But Do Pets Cause Insomnia?

There is, however, evidence that having a dog or cat in the bedroom may decrease your chances of getting a good night's sleep. John Shepard, director of the Mayo Clinic Sleep Disorders Center surveyed his patients about pet-related sleep problems after one of them told him how often she had to get up in the middle of the night to let her dog out to pee. As expected, Shepard found that 60 percent of his 152 pet-owing patients let their pets sleep in their beds. The big surprise was that about half of these pet lovers claimed their pets disrupted their sleep EVERY night. Further, 21 percent of dog owners and 7 percent of cat owners complained that their pets snored.

The Sealy Sleep Census

I recently became interested in the effect of sleeping with pets when I received a pre-publication copy of an article that will appear in *Anthrozoos*, a journal dedicated to research on human-animal interactions. It reported the results of the largest study ever undertaken on the impact of pets on their owners' sleep. The research was conducted by a team of Australians headed by Bradley Smith of Central Queensland University, and it was based on a survey of the sleep

habits of over 13,000 individuals conducted under the auspices of Sealy, the mattress manufacturer.

Using the Sealy data set, the researchers compared the sleep patterns of 1,018 pet co-sleepers with a randomly selected control group of pet owners who did not sleep with their dogs or cats. The two groups were matched for age and gender. (Unfortunately, the Sealy data did not include information on whether the co-sleeping pet was a cat or a dog.)

The Results...

First, the bad news. The researchers found that pet co-sleepers took longer to fall asleep than people who did not share their beds with pets. And, they were more likely to wake up feeling tired.

Now the good news.

In reality, pets had only a minor effect on the sleep of their owners. For example, the pet co-sleepers took, on average, only four minutes longer to fall asleep than the non-pet sleepers. This small difference was, in stat-speak, "statistically significant" which only means it was probably not due to random chance. As the researchers point out, a difference in sleep latency this small is, for all practical purposes, meaningless.

Further, while people who slept with pets were more apt to say they woke up feeling tired, they were no more likely to report feeling tired during the day.

Finally, three of every four participants said they sometimes woke up in the night because of some form of disturbance. But night-time waking was not associated with bedding down with cats or dogs. Indeed, sleeping with a child was much more likely to screw up a person's sleep than sleeping with pet.

The Bottom Line: Don't Worry, Be Sleepy

After reading the few scientific papers that have been published on the impact of sleeping with pets, my advice is to ignore the scary media headlines. I expect the odds that you will contract the plague or meningitis from sleeping with your dog are somewhere between your chances of being killed by a shark (1 in 4 million) and being struck by lightning (1 in 80,000).

Most of the time, our cat Tilly is pretty stand-offish. So for me, the occasional morning when I awake to find her dozing on the bed by my feet is one of life's little pleasures. And I'm not going to let a few minutes less sleep or the prospect of coming down with Chagas disease take it away. So if it makes you (and your pet) happy, take a chance and live on the wild side. Go ahead and share your bed with your four-legged friends.

Post script: You might want to check with your human sleeping partner when it comes to co-sleeping with companion animals. When Blake Shelton asked his wife, the country music diva and dog lover Miranda Lambert, “Do we have to sleep with four dogs in the bed?” she replied, “No, you can sleep in the guest room.’

* *Note: A couple of years ago I came up with the idea that people who were paranoid about infectious diseases would be less attached to pets. I was wrong; in a study using the Percieved Vulnerability to Disease Scale, my students and I found absolutely no relationship between fear of germs and attachment to pets.