



Catch Some ZZZZZZs Avoid the Disease

Did you know that 44% of dog owners and 60% of cat owners sleep with their pets? I once met someone who told me she and her husband shared their bed with their two Great Danes! That is about 300 pounds of pony- like dog filling out any extra space in the king sized bed. Of course more cat parents sleep with their cats because...well do they have any choice? It's hard to lay down the law with certain cats.

Do people sleep with other animals? I have a friend with a Goffin cockatoo who sleeps with him perched on the headboard of the bed. She is awakened most mornings with his good morning droppings hitting her bed. Perhaps she resorted to this during breeding season (February through April) when he would start his mating call, which involved repetitive screaming beginning at 4 AM each morning. If a bird has a lot of physical contact with a person it will treat the individual as its mate. Birds in the wild have almost no physical contact with other birds with the exception of the mate. It will scream for its mate if the mate is not close by.

In a recent Emerging Infectious Diseases Journal, authors cite more than 100 infectious diseases that can be passed to us by our pets. Dr. Bruce Chomei states that having a pet in bed is not a good idea. Specific cases in the article included a man who developed meningitis after his dog slept with him and licked his lip and a young boy who developed plague after sleeping with his cat.

Zoonotic disease may be transmitted from pets to us and some human diseases can be passed onto our pets. H1N1 human flu viruses have been isolated in sick cats, ferrets a cheetah and one dog in the United States. Currently there is no vaccine for the H1N1 flu virus in dogs. There is a vaccine for dog influenza H3N8. This virus can cause a mild cough or severe lethargy fever and pneumonia. We have seen no cases of dog influenza this winter at our practice and have received no word of confirmed dog H3N8 influenza cases in Massachusetts. We do not use this vaccine routinely in our practice. As happens with human flu vaccines, a dog can be vaccinated for one type of flu and then contract another type of flu.

Board certified internal medicine veterinarian Dr. Alice Wolf states, "This is a killed virus vaccine that apparently provides non-sterilizing immunity. Information says that it "lessens the frequency and severity of lung lesions, reduces viral shedding, and reduces duration of coughing." In other words, it does not prevent infection nor does it completely prevent clinical signs of infection. It's nice to have a vaccine available in case this disease becomes more of a problem in the future but for now, it's a non-issue except

for rare cases occurring in group-housed environments with less than ideal husbandry. I cannot recommend it for my household pet patients at this time.”

Although there are a few diseases we can give our pets there are many more they can give us. Ringworm is fungal disease that we can give our pets if we are infected or they can give to us. Usually our pets get it by contacting wild animals. Round worms and hookworms live in many animals’ intestines. The eggs the worms shed are in potting soil, and soil outdoors where a pet has defecated perhaps years ago. The eggs are present in their feces and sometimes their mouths. The eggs of hookworm can migrate through our skin and migrate under the skin as larva. The eggs of roundworm, if ingested by a human, grow into larva but migrate throughout the body with no destination. About 10,000 people contract this infection per year in the United States. Some people lose their vision due to larvae migrating in the eye.

Fleas or ticks are either directly or indirectly related to the transmission of bacterial diseases such as plague, tularemia and cat scratch fever between animals and human beings. Fleas can be prevented on your pet with a safe insecticide recommended by your veterinarian. The wrong insecticide applied improperly can cause seizures and even death in your pet.

How do you minimize your family’s exposure to these diseases? Maintain good hygiene practices and always wash your hands after brushing your pet’s teeth or handling dirt/saliva-covered balls. Pick up all feces with scooper or plastic bag and dispose in trash or toilet. Use your cat ‘s and dog’s heartworm medicine year round because most heartworm meds also include a wormer for the roundworm and hookworm. Consult your veterinarian to get your pet on a regular schedule of screening and prevention. Bottom line is you can catch a disease from your pets whether you sleep with them or not. There is nothing inherently dangerous about sleeping with a pet. Talk with your veterinarian about all the measures you should take to keep your pet healthy so you can enjoy a carefree snooze with your pet.

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