

Furry sleeping partner



FANCY turning in for the night with a “partner” who drools, sheds hair and howls at the moon?

Having a pet in bed may not be the best recipe for a restful night but animal lovers swear they love having their furry friends snuggle up to them.

But by inviting Fido into the bedroom or having Kitty on the bed, are you acting in the best interest of your health and wellbeing?

According to Dr Amir Hamzah Abdul Latiff, consultant clinical immunologist and allergist at Pantai Hospital Kuala Lumpur, the transmission of diseases from pets (or animals) to humans is called zoonoses.

Different types of animals carry different diseases and some animals may be more likely to cause zoonoses than others.

“It is rare though for zoonoses to occur through touching of common household pets like cats and dogs. The transmission is more likely to occur via bites and scratches,” he says.

Meera Murugesan talks to experts on probable health risks caused by bringing pets into the bedroom



Dr Balakrishna says problems won't crop up as long as pets are healthy, vaccinated and have regular veterinary examinations

PET HAZARDS

Germ from pets that contaminate our food and water can also spread diseases. The diseases which occur depend on the type of pet and they include cat scratch disease, campylobacter bacterial infection from cats and dogs through their faeces and salmonella infections from birds, especially chicks and ducklings via the faeces.

Psittacosis from parrots or parakeets, through breathing in of dried bird faeces or respiratory fluids also poses a risk, as is the transmission of parasitic worms like hookworm, roundworm and tapeworm from the stools of cats and dogs.

Dr Amir advises pet owners to wash their hands with running hot water and soap after contact with animals, including reptiles and if they come into contact with the faeces of animals.

He also cautions against rough play with cats and dogs to prevent scratches and bites. Pet cages should be taken outdoors and cleaned regularly and disinfected and pets themselves should be de-wormed and vaccinated for added protection.

HIGH RISK

“Some people are more likely to get diseases from animals than others so they need to practice extra caution,” he says.

Those in the high risk group include children who are less than 5 years old, the elderly, pregnant women, people undergoing treatments for cancer, those who have received organ transplants and people with HIV/AIDS.

A key concern in bringing pets indoors is allergies but while some believe that those with allergies should ban pets from the bedroom, others hold the view that regular exposure to pets can reduce allergies.

Dr Amir says the question of avoidance or continuous exposure is debatable but generally, when one is diagnosed and confirmed to have pet allergies involving the airways, it's recommended that pets be kept out of the bedroom and even the house.

A DIFFERENT VIEW

Pets in the bedroom shouldn't pose a problem as long as they are clean, healthy and have had their vaccinations and medical check-ups, says Dr Balakrishna Polanaidoo, a veterinary surgeon at the Good Shepherd Veterinary Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

Allergies are the main concern as animals with long fur tend to carry ectoparasites such as ticks, fleas and mites and some people are very allergic to these and they need to be careful about bringing pets into the bedroom.

Those with asthma are also vulnerable to animal fur. Dr Balakrishna says cat fur in particular can be a problem because it's light and flies easily around a room. Pregnant women are also advised to stay away from cats to avoid infections which can affect the foetus.

“But there has been much development in the field of preventive medicine for pets so owners today have plenty of options to ensure their pets are healthy and disease-free.”

Dr Balakrishna says that if pets are being kept indoors, it's important to vacuum living spaces and change bedding regularly and if children are living or sleeping in close proximity to pets, they need to be taught to wash their hands thoroughly before consuming food and if they come into contact with the animal's faeces or urine.

WHAT PET LOVERS SAY

Latifah Husin, a public relations manager, has five cats and shares her bed with a short-haired black cat named Salem which she adopted three years ago.

Although she's asthmatic, Latifah says sleeping with Salem doesn't pose a problem because the cat hardly sheds and it sleeps at her feet, not near her face.

She says her cats are always indoors, so they're clean. Only Salem, however, is allowed to sleep on the bed as the other cats are of the long-haired variety and may trigger her asthma.

“Having Salem in my bed enhances the closeness we already share,” she says.

Tan Mei Ling, a music teacher, who has five cats and a dog, allows one cat, called Trixie, to share her bed.

Tan says all her pets are welcome indoors but Trixie is the only one which sleeps with her.

“She doesn't get restless at night unlike the other cats. She just curls up and sleeps through the night.”

Tan adds that she used to be allergic to cat fur but over the years, the problem resolved itself.

Anita Ahmad, who has a year-old cat which shares her bed, says her cat is clean and never allowed outdoors.

Each time the cat pees or poops, Anita cleans him using wet wipes so there's no chance of her bedding getting soiled.

“He loves to sleep close to me and sometimes, even in my arms,” she says.

But creative consultant, Sherrina Krishnan-Leyow, an animal lover and pet rescuer, who shares her home with eight cats and a dog, doesn't believe in allowing pets into the bedroom.

Sherrina points out that pets enjoy companionship and closeness with their owners but they also like their privacy, especially cats, and with dogs, setting boundaries is important.

“Pets and their owners need to develop a relationship based on certain boundaries. That works best.”

HEALTHCARE TIPS

If you're in the high risk group to contract animal borne diseases, avoid:

- Reptiles (turtles, lizards, snakes).
- Baby chicks and ducklings.
- Puppies and kittens less than six months old.
- Pets with diarrhoea.

SNORING PETS

A 2001 study by the Mayo Clinic Sleep Disorders Center in the US, which surveyed 300 people with sleeping problems, found that more than half of them had pets. Nearly 60 per cent of those surveyed slept with pets in the bedroom and 53 per cent reported disrupted sleep every night.

And while 41 per cent of pet owners said these disruptions came from pets sharing their beds, 58 per cent said the problems stemmed from simply allowing their pets to sleep in the same room.

Respondents also complained that their pet's snoring made sleeping difficult. About 21 per cent of those surveyed slept with dogs who snored and seven per cent with snoring cats.