

Sleeping With Dog OK, Poor Handwashing Not OK

Dog owners more likely to share germs with pets by not washing hands, study finds.

Posted: February 4, 2009, 5 a.m. EST

It's OK if pet owners allow dogs to lick their face and sleep on their bed, as long as they make sure to wash their hands, according to research out of Kansas State University's College of Veterinary Medicine.

More than half of owners bond with their pets by sharing the bed and some saliva, surveys show. According to a new study, these dog owners are no more likely to share the same strains of E. coli bacteria with their pets than are other dog owners.

Dr. Kate Stenske, clinical assistant professor at the College of Veterinary Medicine, studied this association as part of her doctoral research at the University of Tennessee. The research is slated to appear in an upcoming issue of the "American Journal of Veterinary Research."

Stenske said surveys also show that nearly half of dog owners share food with their dogs, and more than half let the dog sleep in the bed and lick them on the face.

"About 75 percent of emerging diseases are zoonotic, meaning they are transferrable between humans and other animals," she said. "I wanted to examine the public health aspects of such activities."

The study focused on E. coli bacteria, commonly found in the gastrointestinal tracts of dogs and humans. "It normally doesn't cause any problems, but it can acquire genes to make it antibiotic-resistant," she said.

The study examined fecal samples from dogs and their owners. Stenske found that 10 percent of dog-human pairs had the same E. coli strains.

"This makes us think that dogs are not likely to spread multiple drug-resistant E. coli to their owners, but perhaps owners may spread them to their dogs," she said.

The study showed that sharing the bed or allowing licks on the face had no relation to an increase in shared E. coli. However, Stenske said the research did find an association between antibiotic-resistant E. coli and owners who didn't wash their hands after petting their dogs or before cooking meals.

"We should use common sense and practice good general hygiene," she said.