

U.K. Vet: Sleeping With Dogs Poses Health Risks

Chief veterinary officer warns sleeping with dogs could promote the transmission of zoonotic diseases.

Posted: April 25, 2008, 5 a.m. EST

Sharing a bed with the family dog jeopardizes human health, according to the chief veterinarian in Britain who issued a clear warning: Don't do it. The U.K.'s top veterinary surgeon, Fred Landeg, said that people should not sleep with their dogs in case the pets carry diseases.

The concern, Landeg was cited as saying, is that new and emerging diseases are able to spread from animals to humans. Such diseases are known as zoonoses.

"We can think recently of SARS, which came from animals, and another disease, the Hendra virus, from bats," he was quoted in a British newspaper. "As a veterinary surgeon I would never advise people to keep dogs in their bedroom."

Kathy Hillestad, DVM, a veterinary services representative at Doctors Foster and Smith Inc. in Rhinelander, Wis., said people who want to sleep with their dog must weigh the risks. While there are zoonotic diseases, sharing a bed with a dog is fine if the animal is well cared for, she said.

"With precautions it's OK, many people do sleep with their pets and have absolutely no problem," she said. "I don't think that they should absolutely not do that."

Before a dog gets cozy in a person's bed, however, Hillestad said she recommends a physical exam by a veterinarian. The highest concern, she said, would be the transmission of parasites such as roundworms, which can be picked up from dogs and cats.

A wise pet owner, she said, also guards against fleas and ticks. In addition, annual exams should include a fecal check to screen for intestinal parasites.

"It comes down to pet owners being aware," she said. "In many cases, people are not aware. Because we do tend to have very good veterinary care here in the U.S., people do not have experience with the things that can become problems, like people picking up roundworm eggs from the animals, so people don't think about that, and that's part of the job of a good veterinarian."

Landeg, the U.K.'s acting chief veterinary officer, also said dogs provide some health benefits. For example, people who walk dogs tend to be fitter and have lower blood pressure.