

# ARE PETS IN THE BEDROOM A PROBLEM FOR SLEEP?

**NEW YORK:** There are many potential health benefits to pet ownership, but a good night's sleep may not necessarily be one of them, a small study suggests. Among pet owners surveyed at a sleep clinic, more than half said their non-human friends slept in their bedroom. One in five pet owners described their animals as disruptive, but two in five perceived the pets as unobtrusive or even beneficial to sleep, the survey found.

Even though pets have the potential to jostle their humans or make noise that keeps people awake, the question of whether pets might contribute to sleeping problems isn't one doctors regularly ask patients, said lead study author Dr Lois Krahn, a specialist in sleep medicine and psychiatry at the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale, Arizona. "Since commonly people with

pets dismiss placing their pet outside of their bedroom at night, the question of whether having the pet on the floor, on the bed or curled up next to them becomes important in realizing the goal of helping them to sleep as well as possible with their pet," Krahn said by email.

Sounds, movements, crowding, temperature, odors and allergens are all aspects of the home environment that can interfere with sleep, Krahn and colleagues note in Mayo Clinic Proceedings. To see how pets might influence sleep, the researchers surveyed 150 people treated at the Center for Sleep Medicine at the Mayo Clinic in Arizona, asking about pets and other environmental factors. Almost half the participants, 74 people, had pets, and 31 pet owners had multiple animals in their homes.

One married 35-year-old man had a cat, four Chihuahuas and a basset hound, for example. A married 43-year-old woman had two dogs and five cats. Fifteen people reported pet-related sleep disturbances in the bedroom. Problematic animal behaviors included wandering, snoring, voiding needs, whimpering and seizures. But 31 people described the animals as beneficial in the bedroom, whether they provided comfort and companionship or served as bed warmers.

People sleeping alone, whether they were single or had a partner who wasn't always there at night, more often spoke of pets as beneficial evening companions. Beyond its small size, the study's limitations include the lack of data on whether patients being treated for sleep disorders experienced different challenges with a

pet in the bedroom than people without sleep disorders. Even so, the findings suggest that it's worthwhile for doctors to discuss pets when patients bring up sleep difficulties, the authors conclude.

Breed size, bedroom size and bed size could all contribute to how people and pets interact at night and how well people sleep, said Navy Captain Dr Mark Stephens of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Maryland. "A retriever or a mastiff would occupy significant space and be physically prone to interrupt sleep," Stephens, who wasn't involved in the study, said by email. "A yorkie, not so much." Beyond sleep concerns, it's possible pets - especially dogs - can offer health benefits by encouraging people to get more exercise, noted Bruno Chomel, a veterinary medicine researcher

at the University of California, Davis who wasn't involved in the study. The downsides, other than sleep disruption, might include the potential for pets to transmit diseases to their owners, Chomel said by email.

The study's findings shouldn't cause doctors to warn insomniacs against owning cats or dogs, cautioned Allen McConnell, a psychology researcher at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, who wasn't involved in the study. "People's perception that pets cause disruptive sleep is not great evidence that they do cause sleep disruption," McConnell said by email. "Self-reported beliefs about pets being the cause of people's sleep difficulties is pretty limited without a more comprehensive, experimental study design" — Reuters



**BELMONT:** Justin Balido, peer health coordinator and senior health educator with Health Connected, speaks to a ninth-grade Teen Talk High School class at Carlmont High School in Belmont, California. Sex education in some American high schools is evolving beyond pregnancy and disease prevention to include lessons aimed at curbing sexual assaults. — AP

## 'RESURRECTION PLANTS' OFFER HOPE AS CLIMATE TURNS HOSTILE

**JOHANNESBURG:** As the race to adapt to climate change quickens, a South African scientist is leading global research into developing crops that mimic the extraordinary survival skills of "resurrection plants". Jill Farrant, a professor of molecular and cell biology at the University of Cape Town, hopes that unlocking the genetic codes of drought-tolerant plants could help farmers toiling in increasingly hot and dry conditions. With more than 130 known varieties in the world, resurrection plants are a unique group of flora that can survive extreme water shortages for years. During a drought, the plant acts like a seed, becoming so dry it appears dead.

But when the skies finally open and the rain pours down, the shriveled plant bursts "back to life", turning green and robust in just a few hours. "I want to cater to the subsistence farmer, the person who wants to make enough food to live," Farrant, 55, told AFP. "Farmers are becoming more and more dispirited, and droughts are killing them." Perhaps the most well-known resurrection plant is *Myrothamnus flabellifolius*, which makes antioxidant chemicals to protect it during dry spells and is used in fashion designer Giorgio Armani's cosmetics line.

### A life passion

A farmer's daughter, Farrant recalls stumbling across a resurrection plant as a nine-year-old and being amazed at its seemingly immortal properties. "I wrote in my diary about a plant that had died and came back after the rain," she said. She returned to the subject professionally in 1994, and has since become the world's leading expert in her field. Environmentalists fear that more and more of Africa will be reduced to a dust bowl by global warming, with higher temperatures, reduced water supplies and population growth threatening to trigger worsening famines. Climate change could reduce maize yields across southern Africa by as much as 30 percent by 2030, according to the UN Environment Program.

Ahead of the United Nations conference in Paris at the end of November, countries are facing growing pressure to

keep global warming below two degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-Industrial Revolution levels by weaning their carbon-hungry societies off fossil fuels. But, scientists say it is just as important to adapt to the new reality. "Soil, cropping systems, farming systems—they all must have the capacity to recover from a drastic change in climate," said Rattan Lal, professor of soil science at Ohio State University.

"We should make agriculture part of the solution to our issues... the climate change problem is so huge everything should be on the table." If successful, Farrant will follow in the venerable footsteps of earlier scientists who have saved crops from devastation by exploiting plants with specific strengths. In the 1970s, US maize was rescued from southern leaf blight disease by incorporating resistant genes found in other varieties of maize.

### Adapt to survive

Farrant has recently focused her research on teff, a grass native to Ethiopia whose seed has been used as a staple food in the region for centuries. She hopes to make it more resilient by activating genes she discovered by studying resurrection plants. "My main aim all along is to make crops that can improve drought tolerance," Farrant told AFP. "If we get the money, I would say in 10 to 15 years we've got a product." Experts warn that drought-tolerant crops are not a one-stop solution to the world's climate problems or even a safeguard against hunger. "Food security doesn't only depend on climate, it depends on markets and trade, prices and access by households to food," said Jim Verdin, a drought scientist with the US Geological Survey based in Boulder, Colorado.

Still, Farrant—who won a UNESCO Awards for Women in Science in 2012 — believes her work is a step in the right direction. If she can harness the power of resurrection plants, farmers themselves may have a better chance of survival. "If it doesn't rain, it doesn't matter, at least your plants won't die," she said. "The moment they get rain, they're ready to go." — AFP

## NEARLY 2 MILLION CHILDREN IN SUDAN MALNOURISHED: UNICEF



**KHARTOUM:** UNICEF's representative to Sudan, Geert Cappelaere, speaks with an AFP journalist yesterday in the capital Khartoum. — AFP

**KHARTOUM:** Some two million Sudanese children under five suffer from malnutrition every year, UNICEF's representative said yesterday, urging the international community to boost funding to tackle the problem. Of those two million, nearly 550,000 children have life-threatening severe acute malnutrition, with many of those affected living in the underdeveloped east and conflict-hit Darfur region. "Over 38 percent of children under the age of five are chronically malnourished across Sudan," said Geert Cappelaere, the representative of the UN children's agency to Sudan. The number of children under five affected by chronic malnutrition works out at around two million, he told AFP in an interview. This figure includes 550,000 with severe acute malnutrition.

"In terms of numbers, it is an incredibly huge number of children who are affected by malnutrition in Sudan," he said. The worst affected areas are Red Sea State in eastern Sudan and North Darfur State in the west. Ethnic insurgents have been battling the

Arab-dominated Khartoum government in the western Darfur region since 2003, displacing millions and leaving some 300,000 people dead according to the UN. Eastern Sudan has suffered from severe underdevelopment and is one of the country's poorest regions.

Mothers stopping breastfeeding too early and high rates of diarrhoea among children because of poor sanitation were behind the high malnutrition rates in the east. Every year, UNICEF in Sudan treats some 150,000 of the most severely malnourished children. Cappelaere urged the government and international community to contribute more funds, saying that "billions, not millions" of dollars (euros) are needed to reduce child malnutrition levels. "We need to continue encouraging the government to invest more in malnutrition but at the same time it will have to be a collective responsibility, the international community will have to step up if it is serious in its commitment to help the Sudanese people," Cappelaere said. — AFP

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