

Sleepovers reduce stress in shelter dogs

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Of the estimated more than 4 million dogs that end up in animal shelters each year, about half a million are euthanized. To increase the number of shelter dogs that are adopted, Arizona State University's Canine Science Collaboratory studies what happens in animal shelters and how it affects dogs.

The research team just finished looking at how sleepovers, or short-term foster care, impact the [stress response](#) and rest patterns of [shelter dogs](#). The study, published in *PeerJ* on March 27, was conducted in collaboration with shelters in Arizona, Utah, Texas, Montana and Georgia.

"We are trying to improve the lives of shelter dogs by helping them finding loving homes," said Clive Wynne, professor of psychology and head of the Canine Science Collaboratory.

A weekend to the workweek

The idea to study sleepovers came after a trip to Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in Utah. The sanctuary has a long-standing sleepover program in which volunteers take dogs home overnight. The ASU research team and their collaborator Erica Feuerbacher of Virginia Tech decided to test if such short-term foster care experiences were beneficial to shelter dogs.

"We wanted to understand what effect sleepovers had on dogs' behavior and if being away from the shelter environment, even temporarily,

potentially reduced the stress they experience," said Lisa Gunter, Maddie's Fund Research Fellow in the ASU psychology department and first author on the study.

The team tracked the dogs' stress by measuring the stress hormone cortisol before, during and after sleepovers. Even though the five participating shelters were very different—some care for 600 dogs a year and others more than 6,000—the cortisol levels for all the dogs decreased during a sleepover. When the dogs returned to the shelter, their cortisol levels were the same as before. Gunter said the sleepovers were like a weekend away from work: they provided a short break from the stress of living in a shelter.

"It was an open question if it would be stressful for dogs to come back to the shelter after being away for a weekend but because of this study, we know a sleepover is a very welcome break," said Debbie McKnight, vice president of field and animal welfare at the Arizona Humane Society (AHS). AHS was one of the five shelters that participated in the study. "The sleepovers let us find out so much about how a dog behaves in a home, and that knowledge helps us match them to their forever home."

AHS has continued using sleepovers because they benefit the dogs and are an easy way to introduce new volunteers to fostering.

Noisy neighbors

Dogs who live in homes sleep approximately 14 hours each day, while dogs in shelters only sleep just under 11 hours each day.

"Trying to sleep in a shelter is like trying to sleep with noisy neighbors," Gunter said. "You can't get in a good nap during the day."

To understand the impact of short-term foster care on rest patterns of

shelter dogs, the research team outfitted dogs from the shelters in Arizona, Montana, Georgia and Texas with an activity-tracking collar. The longest rest period was during the sleepover, but even after returning to the shelter, the dogs rested longer than before.

Because sleepovers reduced dogs' [cortisol levels](#) and increased their time at rest, Gunter said shelters that do not currently have short-term foster programs should give sleepovers a try. Potential adopters often use information from foster volunteers when making decisions about whether to bring a dog home.

But, sleepovers are just one piece of the puzzle to improving the lives of shelter dogs. The Canine Science Collaboratory is also studying how to keep dogs out of shelters and to transform the experience once they are there. The team is currently studying other programs that allow dogs out of shelters, like field trips and long-term foster care. With a grant from Maddie's Fund, they are enrolling 100 animal shelters across the country in a study to understand how foster care impacts the dogs in shelters, organizations that implement foster programs and the staff and volunteers who make them possible.

More information: Lisa M. Gunter et al, Evaluating the effects of a temporary fostering program on shelter dog welfare, *PeerJ* (2019). [DOI: 10.7717/peerj.6620](https://doi.org/10.7717/peerj.6620)

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